

THE ARGOSY.

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THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL.

BY MRS. HENRY WOOD, AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PHYSICIAN AND HIS WIFE.

SPRING was succeeding to a certain long and sharp winter; but the mornings and evenings were dreary, and the east wind which prevailed penetrated to the very warmest house in Wexborough—a fashionable town for invalids, noted all over England for its salubrity. That east wind had struck inflammation to the chest of a lovely child, and was quickly carrying it away. It lay on its mother's knee before the fire. She, the mother, was young and very pretty, but delicate and careworn. Her whole heart was wound up in this child, and she would not believe but that it was recovering.

"Don't you think it looks a little better than it did this morning?" she anxiously asked, raising her eyes to her husband, who had come in and was standing near.

He made an evasive reply, for he was a physician, and he knew that the child was dying. At that moment there was a knock at the front door, and they heard the maid show the visitor into the consulting-room. Their only servant, for they were very poor, the physician trying to struggle into practice.

"It's Mr. Fairfax, sir," she said, entering the room.

Now Mr. Fairfax was Dr. Elliot's landlord, and the physician, for certain reasons, would rather have had a visit from any man, living or dead, than from him. He broke out into an impatient word, and demanded sharply of the girl why she admitted *him*. She was beginning an explanation, but he would not stop to hear it.

"Well, Doctor," began Mr. Fairfax, who owned no end of property in Wexborough, "I am not come upon my usual visit, and that I told your girl, for I saw she was preparing the old answer. You know that house of mine in the Crescent, which was to be let furnished?"

"Yes."

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"Well, it is let, and the people have arrived to-day. A lady and gentleman and several servants—plenty of money there seems to be there. The gentleman appears in bad health, and they asked me to recommend a physician. So I mentioned you."

"I am very much obliged to you," said Dr. Elliot, with animation.

"Yes, but, Doctor, we don't do anything for nothing in this world. I shall expect part of your fees to be handed to me for back rent. Without my recommendation, you would never have got in there, for I need not remind you that there are physicians in Wexborough older established and more popular than you. Out of every guinea you must give me half. Is it a bargain?"

"It is," answered Dr. Elliot. "Honour bright."

"Then put on your hat, and go up at once. They want to see you to-night. Number nine."

Dr. Elliot soon reached the Crescent. His patient was seated in a room alone. One leg, cased in flannel, was raised on a foot-rest. Glasses and dessert were on the table, though more from custom than for use. Dr. Elliot's card had preceded him, and the servant had placed a chair.

"They have brought me here for a change of air," he said to Dr. Elliot, after speaking of his illness; "but I have little faith, myself, in any change being beneficial. Such a complication of disorders! And now this attack of gout, worse than any I ever had. I am a young man to have gout, Doctor, but it is hereditary in my family."

"Yes," replied Dr. Elliot. "You have perhaps—excuse me, but I ought to know all your case—been a free liver?"

"Pretty well for that: though not more so than other country gentlemen addicted to field sports, and latterly I have been obliged to be abstemious."

When Dr. Elliot was writing the prescription it occurred to him that Mr. Fairfax had not mentioned the name, so he asked it now. Turnberry, he thought was the reply, but his patient was taken with a fit of coughing at the moment. He wrote it "——Turnberry, Esquire." As he was leaving the house, a servant came up and said his mistress wished to see him before he went.

The lady stood in the drawing-room when Dr. Elliot entered, the rays of the chandelier falling upon her. He was struck with amazement at her beauty. A tall, stately woman of eight-and-twenty, her eyes haughty, her complexion brilliant, her features of exquisite contour.

She began to speak; he began to speak; but neither finished. Both stood, awed to silence, for they had recognised each other, and to neither was the recognition palatable. It was Mrs. Turnbull, not Turnberry, and Dr. Elliot saw in her the sister of his wife, once Clara Freer. *She* saw in him the handsome, harum-scarum young medical student, Tom Elliot, whom she had admired, if not loved, ere he had declared his preference for her sister. That was eight years ago, and

no communication had been held between the families since. Tom Elliot's friends had helped him while he finished his studies, obtained his diploma, and became Dr. Elliot. Since then, he had set up at Wexborough, and had been living on, he hardly knew how, waiting for practice: his wife would have said, struggling on.

Dr. Elliot held out his hand to Mrs. Turnbull. "May I hope that the lapse of time has softened your feelings towards me?" he said, in low, persuasive tones—and none knew how to speak more persuasively than he. "Now that we have been brought together in this strange way, let me implore a reconciliation—for Louisa's sake."

Mrs. Turnbull, after a moment's hesitation, put her hand into his. "For Louisa's sake," she repeated. "Are you living in Wexborough? Have you a flourishing practice?"

"Not flourishing. Practice comes slowly to beginners."

"How is Louisa? Is she much altered?"

"Very much, I think. The loss of her children has had a great effect upon her."

"Ah! you have children, then?" And old jealous feeling of bygone days came over Mrs. Turnbull. She had had none.

"Yes, we have been unfortunate in them all, save the eldest. I have left one at home now in Louisa's arms, dying."

Mrs. Turnbull was shocked, and a better feeling returned to her. "I should like to see Louisa," she exclaimed. "Suppose I go now?"

"Now!" cried Dr. Elliot, in dismayed tones, as he thought of the inward signs of poverty in his house, and its disordered appearance just then. "But we are all at sixes and sevens to-night, with this dying child."

"Oh, I can allow for that: I know what illness is. I have seen enough of it since I married Squire Turnbull. Wait one moment, and I will go with you."

She had possessed a will of her own as Clara Freer, and she had not parted with it as Mrs. Turnbull. She called for her bonnet and cloak, and then went into the dining-room to her husband. He looked surprised, as well he might, to see her going out at the dusk of evening, in a strange town.

"Did you recognise him?" she said, leaning over her husband's chair.

"Recognise him!" repeated Squire Turnbull, not understanding. "He is a clever man, I think; seems to know what he is about. Young, though. His name is"—running his eyes over the card—"Elliot. 'Dr. Elliot.'"

"He is metamorphosed into Doctor now. He was Tom Elliot when he ran away with Louisa."

"By jingo! it's never that Tom Elliot!" uttered the astonished Squire. "Is *he* Louisa's husband? Well, it did strike me that I had seen his face before."

"He is Louisa's husband, and she is in trouble, he says. A child

of theirs is dying—now—to-night—as I understand. I fancy, too, they are in poverty,” she added, “which of course was only to be expected, acting as they did. But he asked me to let bygones be bygones, for Louisa’s sake, and I am going to see her.”

“Bygones! of course let them be bygones,” cried the warm-hearted Squire; “why not? I have always blamed your father for holding out about it. It was done, and couldn’t be helped; and the only remedy left was to make the best of it. A dying child! poverty! I say, Clara, don’t forget that we have abundance of everything, money included. Let your hand be open, wife, if wanted. Poor Loo!”

She went out, leaving the Squire to his reflections. They carried him back, naturally to that old time, eight years ago. He had admired Louisa Freer then, and wished to marry her, but Mr. Tom Elliot forestalled him. He had then, after some delay, transferred his proposals to the elder sister, and they were accepted. To be mistress of Turnbull Park, and two thousand a-year, was a position any lawyer’s daughter might covet. Clara did, and gained it.

It was a strange meeting, the two sisters coming together, in that unexpected manner, after so many years of estrangement. Oh! the contrast between them! Mrs. Elliot pale, haggard, unhappy, her gown a faded merino, and her hair little cared for: Clara, who had thrown off her mantle, in an evening dress of black velvet, its low body and sleeves trimmed with rich white lace, and gold ornaments decorating her neck, her arms and her luxuriant hair! More beautiful she was, more beautiful altogether, than of yore.

There arose now, from a stool at his mother’s feet, a lovely boy of seven years old; tall, healthy and straight as a dart. He fixed his large brown eyes on the stranger’s face; but he was not dressed very well, and Dr. Elliot, muttering something about “William’s bed-time,” took him out of the room.

“What a noble boy!” involuntarily exclaimed Mrs. Turnbull, gazing after him; “what an intelligent countenance! He is your eldest, I presume, and this was your youngest.”

Was! She unconsciously spoke of the infant in the past tense, for she had noticed its ghastly face and laboured breathing. Very, very fast was its life ebbing now.

“How many children have you?” inquired Mrs. Elliot.

“None.” And there was something in the tone of the short answer which told the subject was a sore one.

“You are well off,” vehemently spoke Mrs. Elliot. “Better never have them than have them only to lose them. William was born within the first year of our marriage, and then for nearly three years I had no more children. I did so wish for a girl—as did my husband. How I longed for it I cannot tell you. The passionate appeal of Rachel I understood then—‘Give me children, or else I die.’ Well, a girl was born; but born to die: then another was born; but born

to die : now this one, who has stayed longer with me than they, for she is fourteen months old ; now this one is about to die ! You are well off."

"Is Dr. Elliot a good husband to you?" questioned Mrs. Turnbull.

"He is a kind husband—yes—generally speaking," was the reply of Mrs. Elliot, while a vivid blush dyed her pale cheek. "But he is fond of pleasure—not altogether what may be called a domestic husband. And now, Clara, dare I ask you of my father? Two years ago I heard that he was living, and I see you are not in mourning."

"He is well and hearty. As full of business as ever."

"Does he ever," hesitated Mrs. Elliot, "speak of forgiving me?"

"He has never mentioned you, never once. He was dreadfully incensed at the step you took. And when offended, it is so hard for him to forgive. You must remember that, Louisa."

"I wrote to him when Willy was born. And again when I lost my first little girl."

"Indeed!" cried Mrs. Turnbull. "He never told me. What was the result?"

"Both times the same. He returned the letters in a blank cover. It is not that I want assistance from him, but I should like forgiveness."

"But some assistance would not be unwelcome, I presume."

"Oh, we can manage to get along. I suppose it is only right that straitened circumstances should follow such a marriage as ours. If I craved help for anything, it would be for the boy. He is a most intelligent child—as you saw by his eyes and countenance—can read as well as I can. But it is time his education was begun in earnest."

"Will you give him to me?" eagerly asked Mrs. Turnbull. "I will adopt him and do by him as if he were my own. Unless I am mistaken, you are shortly in expectation of another infant."

"It is so," answered Mrs. Elliot. "Night and day, since there has been a fear of losing this one, have I prayed it might be a girl."

"Then you can spare me the boy. Talk it over with Dr. Elliot. It is only to lend him, you know, Louisa ; and remember, the advantages to him will be great."

Mrs. Elliot did talk over with her husband Mrs. Turnbull's offer, and they were both of opinion that one so desirable should not be refused. Therefore, when Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull departed for Turnbull Park, William Elliot accompanied them. The little girl had died.

The following year they returned to Wexborough. Dr. and Mrs. Elliot were progressing but little better : practice was very slow in coming to him. They hardly knew William : he was wonderfully improved. Dressed in costly habits, accustomed now to luxury, servants, a pony at his command, and his education pressed on, it was indeed an alteration for him. But his sweet disposition had not

changed, and he met his parents with a burst of emotion that astonished them. He came every day to see them, but his home was still with Mrs. Turnbull.

Not long had Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull been at Wexborough this second time before a disagreeable feeling which during their former visit had stolen like a shadow over Mrs. Elliot's heart, rose again. Like a shadow, indeed, for she would not *allow* herself to notice it then, and with their departure had dismissed it from her thoughts, never, she sincerely hoped, to recall it. Yet now it was forcing itself upon her with redoubled vigour—the suspicion that her husband admired, not in too sisterly a way, Mrs. Turnbull; that there was too good an understanding between them. Not that Mrs. Elliot feared anything like guilt. Oh, no. Whatever opinion she may have formed, or had cause to form, of her husband's laxity of morals during their married life, she was perfectly secure in her sister's principles; but that an undue attachment for each other's society had grown up was very plain. On Mrs. Turnbull's part it was probably nothing beyond gratified vanity; but Louisa had never forgotten how Clara had once confessed to something very like love for Tom Elliot. Louisa had then thought that his love and his admiration were given to none but herself; she now knew that at least his admiration was given to every handsome woman who came in his way. Few had he fallen in with so beautiful as Mrs. Turnbull; he was at no pains to conceal his sense of it, and she repulsed not the marked attentions of the very handsome physician. But all this was disagreeable to Mrs. Elliot, and as the weeks of the Turnbulls' second sojourn at Wexborough lengthened into months, and her husband passed more and more of his time with Mrs. Turnbull, it jarred not only on her feelings, but on her temper. Existence seemed to possess for her but two phases: passionate love for her little baby-girl and jealousy of her husband and sister. Never yet had she breathed a word of this unpleasantness to Dr. Elliot, but she was naturally of a hasty spirit, and the explosion was sure to come.

One afternoon, as she stood at her window, holding her babe, she saw her sister and William coming down the street. Then she saw her husband meet them, draw Mrs. Turnbull's arm within his, and lead her in. William came running up to the sitting-room.

"Where is your aunt, Willy?" she said as she stooped to kiss him.

"She is gone with papa into his consulting-room. Mamma, who do you think is come to Uncle Turnbull's?"

Mrs. Elliot did not heed him: she was listening for any sound from downstairs, jealously tormenting herself with conjectures of what they might be doing; what talking about. Mrs. Turnbull came up shortly.

"I have had the greatest surprise to-day, Louisa," she exclaimed. "Who do you think came by the mid-day coach?"

Mrs. Elliot answered coldly—that she was not likely to guess.

"Papa."

"Papa!" repeated Mrs. Elliot, aroused from her brooding thoughts.

"Papa. I never was more surprised. We were at luncheon. The servant—it happened to be the new one who was in waiting—said a gentleman wanted to see me, and in walked my father. It seems he was at Wexborough, on business for one of his clients, and being so near, ran over here this morning. But he leaves to-morrow by the early coach, and is now gone to the Royal Arms to secure a bed. I could not persuade him to sleep at our house; he said he should disturb us in the morning."

"Did Willy see him?" sighed Mrs. Elliot.

"Yes. But papa took little notice of him: he never does when he sees him at the Park. I am going to leave Willy with you for the afternoon, for his presence always seems to cast a restraint on my father. I wish you would give me a glass of wine, Louisa," added Mrs. Turnbull. "I am thirsty."

Mrs. Elliot laid down her infant, and brought forth a decanter of port wine. It was the same as that in Mrs. Turnbull's own cellar, Squire Turnbull having sent in a present of some to Mrs. Elliot.

"I am thirsty too," said William. "Let me have a glass, mamma."

"Wine for you!" exclaimed Mrs. Elliot; "no, indeed, Willy. When little boys are thirsty, they drink water."

"What nonsense!" interposed Mrs. Turnbull. "Give the child some wine, Louisa. It is the fish-sauce we had at luncheon, no doubt, that is making us thirsty."

A half-dispute ensued, carried on good-humouredly by Mrs. Turnbull, with bitterness by her sister. The latter handed William a tumbler of water: Mrs. Turnbull ordered him not to drink it till his mamma put some wine in it, and William Elliot, a sensitive child, stood in discomfort, his cheeks crimson, and whispering that he was not thirsty then. Dr. Elliot came in.

"Did you ever know anything like Louisa's absurdity to-day?" Mrs. Turnbull said to him. "Willy is dying with thirst: I say put a little drop of wine into that water, instead of letting him drink it cold, and she won't give him wine."

"He shall not have wine," repeated Mrs. Elliot, with acrimony. "It is improper for him."

"Nonsense!" muttered Dr. Elliot, and poured some wine into the water, ordering William to drink it. His wife's face and lips turned of a deadly whiteness; with her, the sign of extreme anger. She caught up her babe and left the room.

"I must be going, Louisa," called out Mrs. Turnbull. "My father will have returned from the hotel. Good-bye."

She went downstairs, followed by Dr. Elliot, and Mrs. Elliot saw them walking slowly up the street together. She was boiling over with wrath and indignation.

Willy stole towards her, his little face a picture of sorrow as he timidly strove to utter some words. "Mamma, dearest mamma!" he

whispered, bursting into a flood of tears, "I am so sorry I asked for the wine! I did not know you wished me not to have it. I will not ask for any again."

She drew him to her, kissed him passionately, and sobbed with him. But she made no comment to the child.

CHAPTER XV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

DR. ELLIOT did not return to tea; not, in fact, until it was time to take William home; and then came the explosion. The physician took it with provoking coolness, began to whistle, and asked whether the boy was ready.

"He never goes back again," said Mrs. Elliot. "His bed is made up at home."

"There is no reason for the lad's interests to suffer because your temper has turned crusty this evening," observed Dr. Elliot. "He shall certainly go back to Squire Turnbull's."

"When a woman can incite a child to disobey his mother, she is no longer fitting to hold control over him. Mrs. Turnbull shall have no more control over mine."

"Was it worth while to make a fuss over such a trifle? As if a drop of wine would hurt the boy! Remember the obligations he is under to Mrs. Turnbull."

"Remember your obligations to me, your wife. I have borne much, Thomas, since we married, but I will not be domineered over by you both conjointly, or tamely see your love given to her."

"Tamely!—love!" uttered Dr. Elliot. "What nonsense now, Louisa?"

"Do you think I am blind?" she retorted; "do you think I am a stone, destitute of feeling? Is it not too apparent that all your thoughts, your time, your wishes are given to Mrs. Turnbull?"

"Oh, if you are going to begin on the old score of jealousy, I have nothing more to say," observed Dr. Elliot, carelessly; "but I think you might exempt your own sister from such suspicions. Harriet!" he called out, throwing open the room door, "put on Master William's things, and send him down."

"I say the child shall not go back," passionately uttered Mrs. Elliot.

"And I say he shall. When you have calmed down to common-sense, Louisa, you will see the folly of sacrificing his advantages of education to your fancies, which are as capricious as they are unjust."

"I will apply to the law—I will apply to the nearest magistrate, rather than have my child forcibly disposed of against my will," she vehemently continued.

"My dear, the law is not on your side, but on mine. A father's authority does not yield to magistrates," laughed Dr. Elliot. To preserve that nonchalant good humour was, in her present mood, as fuel heaped on fire. She would rather he had struck her.

And the matter ended by his taking William back to Mrs. Turnbull's.

"Loo's furiously savage," he thought to himself as he went. "But she should not take such crochets into her head."

Mrs. Elliot certainly was "savage" as she sat alone that long evening. Things wore to her jaundiced mind a worse appearance than they really deserved. Her husband was magnified into a sort of demon Don Juan; her sister into a beautiful siren, who lived but to attract him, and rule over her. "Oh! the blind child I was to fly in the face of my friends, and run away with Tom Elliot!" she bitterly exclaimed. "I suppose the act is working out its own punishment; for what a life is mine! Struggling with poverty—losing my idolised children—spurned by my father—neglected by my husband—patronised by my sister, and compelled to yield my boy to her charge! His education—there it is. It ought to go on, yet we have not the means to pursue it; and never shall have, it seems to me."

"Why not ask my father?" The question came from her own heart, but with a sudden intensity that startled her to believe one must be at her elbow who had whispered it. "Why not go to him now, this very moment, at the hotel, and press it on him?"

Mrs. Elliot was in that excited state that sways to action. Calling the maid to sit upstairs, lest the child should cry, she put on her things and went out.

The Royal Arms was not far off: a handsome hotel, with a flight of steps, and a blazing gas-lamp at its entrance. She turned her face away from its light. It was striking ten as she ascended to the door. The landlord himself happened to be crossing the passage.

"Is a gentleman of the name of Freer stopping here?" inquired Mrs. Elliot.

"Freer? No, ma'am."

"A friend of Mr. Turnbull's in the Crescent," she explained. "He came this afternoon and engaged a bed-room."

"Oh, that gentleman—I did not know his name. Wears a bag-wig, ma'am."

"The same."

"He has not come in yet."

But as they stood there, someone else came up the steps, and passed without notice: an old gentleman in a bag-wig. The landlord was pressing forward to mention the lady, but she clasped his arm to detain him.

"Not here, in this public passage," she whispered, shrinking into a

corner. "I will follow to his bedroom. I am his daughter. There has been a difference between us, and we have not met for years. If you have children you can feel for me."

The landlord looked at her compassionately, at her pale face and visible emotion. He stood before her till Mr. Freer had received his candle from the hands of the waiter, and had gone upstairs.

He was winding up his watch when Mrs. Elliot entered. She closed the door and stood before him. He turned round in surprise, but he did not recognise her in the dim light. Her agitation was great, she became hysterical, and fell forward at his feet.

"Oh, father! forgive, forgive me!" she sobbed out. Mr. Freer started from her, almost in affright.

"Louisa!—Elliot! you! What brings you here?" The christian name had arisen involuntarily to his lips. He seemed to add the other by way of counteracting his familiarity.

"Sorrow brings me here—misery brings me. Father, I cannot live without your forgiveness. I think you must have cursed me, and that the curse is still clinging to us, for nothing has prospered with me since I left your home."

"I have not cursed you," he said, still standing aloof from her.

"Will you accord me your forgiveness?" she continued to ask.

"Yes; if you can be satisfied with the letter and not the spirit."

She looked at him inquiringly, her lips parted, her thin white hands raised in supplication.

"If to say that I forgive you will avail, that forgiveness you may take," he said, answering her look. "But when you cast me off to become the wife of Thomas Elliot, you put a bar to all future intercourse between us."

"Your full and free forgiveness," she continued to implore.

"My free forgiveness," he repeated, "but not my friendship. You have your husband's."

"He has not been to me the husband I expected—hoped for," she cried, saying more than she would have said but for the jealous, angry feeling that was rife within her, so especially on that night.

The lawyer smiled, a grim smile. "Few wives, when they marry as you did, do find their husbands what they expected."

She looked earnestly at him. She had risen, and stood before him, her hands clasped still. "Oh, father, father, that I had never left your home!" she wailed. "At times I say to myself, 'Let me cheat my memory, and persuade it that all these years have been a dream—that I shall awake and find myself little Louisa Freer!'"

"Ah," returned the lawyer; "many a one would give their lives to awake from the same dream."

"It is not visited on him as it is on me," she added, her cheeks flushing. "Hour after hour, while I am sitting alone, brooding over the past, striving to stave off present annoyances, he spends away from me, seeking only how he may amuse himself."

"Nothing else could be expected from a man of the disposition of Thomas Elliot but that he would seek his own amusement, married or single. I could have told you that years ago."

"I know you never liked him, papa, but will you not be reconciled to him?"

"Never," vehemently uttered Lawyer Freer. "We will not speak upon the subject."

"I came here to urge another plea," she sadly added, after an interval of silence. "To ask you to help me; we are very poor."

"It is waste of time," was the stern reiteration of Lawyer Freer. "Thomas Elliot has no help from me, before my death or after it."

"It is not for him," she eagerly rejoined, her eyes glistening with excitement. "Father, I declare to you that I ask for it but to thwart my husband, not to assist him. You have seen a child of mine at Mrs. Turnbull's?"

"I have seen a child there," he coldly answered. "I believe my daughter once mentioned that it was yours."

My daughter! Well, she deserved it.

"It is my only boy: the rest were girls, and they have all died, save one. Father, I named him William, after you."

"I had been better pleased that you had named him any other name to associate with that of Elliot," was the disheartening answer.

"It is for him that I need assistance," she resumed. "I want to place him at school. Oh, sir! if you knew all, perhaps you would aid me to do it."

"What mistaken notion are you labouring under?" returned Mr. Freer. "Help a child of Thomas Elliot's! Has he been sending you on this strange errand?"

"He does not know I am come. He was absent when I stole out of my home to ask this. It would be against his will if the boy is placed at school, for he wishes him to remain with Mrs. Turnbull. Do you remember, father, how Clara used to tyrannise over me at home—how she used to put upon me?"

"It may possibly have been the case. She was older than you."

"Sir, you knew she did, though you may not care to recall it. But she does still, and surely she is not justified. I have not a will of my own, especially as regards the boy; every wish I express she opposes, and Dr. Elliot upholds her. I could bear this," passionately went on Mrs. Elliot, disclosing what she would have shrunk from doing in a calmer moment—"I could bear her encouraging the child in disobedience, but what I cannot bear is that she should draw my husband's affections away from me."

"I do not understand," replied Mr. Freer.

"Because you do not know Clara," said Mrs. Elliot. "She was as fond of Tom Elliot as I was, in those old days, but she had more worldly prudence. Who first encouraged him to our house?—she did."

Who flirted with, and attracted him?—she did. And when the truth came out, that he loved me, she betrayed the tale to you in her jealous anger. Then came forward Squire Turnbull. I was a young, frightened child, and I did not dare to object to him; so, to escape, I rushed upon a worse course."

Lawyer Freer was knitting his brows. Parts of her speech had grated on his ear.

"She never forgave me from the morning she knew Tom Elliot cared for me and not for her: she has never forgiven me yet. And now they have learnt to care for each other; the time, the attentions, the love my husband owes me are given to her. Believe me or not as you please, sir, it is the disgraceful truth."

"Disgraceful, degenerate girls, both of you," he exclaimed, angrily, "to be led away by a man like him!"

"So I come to you for aid," she continued; "and I have explained this, not to betray her folly, but to justify my application. If I could place the boy at school, we should no longer be under obligations to Mrs. Turnbull, neither would the child be an excuse for my husband's visits there. You cannot countenance such conduct in my sister."

"I have nothing to do with Mrs. Turnbull's conduct. She is old enough and wise enough to take care of herself, and I do not fear her doing so. And for you—should you ever become a widow, then you may apply to me."

The tears were struggling down Mrs. Elliot's cheeks. She ventured to touch and take her father's hand. "For my peace and William's welfare I implore aid," she said; "not for Dr. Elliot."

Mr. Freer did not withdraw his hand, and he did not return her clasp; he suffered it to remain passively in hers. "You are asking what is not in my power to accord, Louisa," he at length said. "When you left my protection for Thomas Elliot's, I took an oath that he and his should remain strangers to me; that so long as he should live, they should never enjoy aught of mine. As well ask me to break this hand"—and he held it out—"as to break my oath."

"So there goes another of my life's delusions," she uttered, in a tone of anguish—"nearly the last. In my most sad moments a ray of light has flashed across me—a vision of my being reconciled to my father; of his blessing me and my children, a blessing that might have been worked out in life. How could I have expected it? Father, farewell. God bless you, and pity me!"

"Fare you well, Louisa."

He took the candle and followed her to the door, intending to light her down the stairs, but the rays of a lamp hanging outside rendered it unnecessary. He stood there, and when she glanced back, from the end of the corridor, she saw him looking after her.

Yearningly she strained her eyes to his, and her lips moved, and her steps halted. Perhaps she would have flown back to him; she had it in her heart to do so; to fall upon his neck, and, with kisses and sobs, implore a more loving forgiveness; but he turned in and closed the door, even as she looked, and she passed swiftly down the stairs, with a bursting spirit. It was the last time they met on earth.

Nearly the last of her life's delusions, Mrs. Elliot had said. What else remained to her? Her children. William departed, as before, with Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull for Nearfordshire. With the latter's absence, Louisa again forgot her jealous troubles, and peace—rather cold perhaps, but undisturbed by storms—was resumed between herself and her husband. Upon her young child, the girl, every wish and hope seemed now centred. The love she lavished upon the infant was a matter of remark to all who had an opportunity of witnessing it: *they* loved their children, but not with an all-absorbing passion such as this. Did Mrs. Elliot ever hear that a check, sooner or later, always comes to love so inordinate? She would have known it, had she looked much into the world. "Oh! when my darling can speak, when it can answer me with its dear little voice, I shall be too happy," she was wont to say. "My father has abandoned me, my husband has forgotten his love for me, my noble boy gladdens other eyes than mine, but in this precious child shall lie my recompense. Make haste, my darling; make haste to speak!"

But the child seemed backward in speaking, and in walking also. Fifteen months old, and it attempted neither. Master Willy, at that age, had gone, with his sturdy legs, all over the room, and made himself heard when he wanted bread-and-butter. "Girls are not so forward as boys," reasoned Mrs. Elliot.

It was a pretty child, and would have been more so but for an unusual look about the forehead, and a vacant stare in its full blue eyes. Once or twice that vacant gaze had stricken a chill to the mother's heart, bringing with it a wild fear, a dread, which she drove back as some far-off horror, that would kill her if ever it came near.

One afternoon the servant, Harriet, had the baby lying on her knee. She had just come in from a walk, had taken off its things, and was now looking curiously at its face, and touching its head here and there. Dr. Elliot was stretched on the sofa, reading, as Harriet thought, but his eyes were raised over the book, watching her motions.

"Harriet, what are you looking at?"

The question was sudden, and startled the servant. She replied, in a confused, vague manner, that she was looking at "nothing particular."

Dr. Elliot came forward, drew a chair in front of them, and sat down, gazing first at her, then at the child. "What *were* you

thinking of, Harriet," he persisted, "when you touched the child's forehead?"

Harriet burst into tears. She was very fond of the infant. "I hope you will not ask me, sir," she rejoined; "I should be afraid to tell."

"Afraid of a fiddlestick," returned Dr. Elliot. "If you fancy there is anything the matter with her, speak, and it may be"—he seemed to hesitate for a word—"remedied. Many an infant has been ruined for life through its ailments not being known."

"It was not me, sir," began Harriet, looking round at the door, which was ajar, to make sure her mistress was not there, though indeed she could then hear her overhead in her own room. "It's true I have wondered at the child's being so dull, though I never thought much about it; but this afternoon, as I was sitting on a bench in the promenade walk, old Mrs. Chivers came up—she as goes out nursing."

"I know," said Dr. Elliot. "Well?"

"She had her daughter's child with her, a lively little thing of eleven months. It was stepping about, holding on by our knees, and laughing.

"That's what your poor little charge won't do on a sudden," she begins to me.

"Why not?" says I. 'Little Miss Clara's backward, but she'll be all right when she gets her teeth.'

"Why, she's got her teeth," returns Nurse Chivers; 'hasn't she?'

"Only six," I said. 'Many a child's more backward in walking than she.'

"I don't say she won't walk in time," went on Dame Chivers, 'but you can't have handled that baby for fifteen months, and not have found out what's the matter with it. Folks are talking of it in the town, and saying——'" Harriet stopped.

"Go on," cried Dr. Elliot, with compressed lips.

"And saying," Nurse Chivers continued, 'that the Doctor must know it, if its poor mamma does not. Though the look of the baby might have told her that it is'——I don't like," broke off Harriet, with renewed tears, "to repeat the cruel word she said—though Nurse Chivers was grieved herself, and did not mean it unkindly. But if she's right, the dear baby will never have wit nor sense through life to comfort us."

Tighter, far tighter was the strain upon his lips, and a dark shade of pain marked his handsome face. He bent his head over his child. It lay wide awake, but perfectly passive in Harriet's lap, its lips apart and its glistening eyes staring upwards.

"Oh, sir," sobbed Harriet, "is it true?" And then she saw the expression on the Doctor's countenance, and knew that the news was no news to him. "Whoever will break it to my mistress?" she wailed.

"It must be suffered to come upon her by gradual degrees," was his answer. But had Dr. Elliot raised his eyes, he would have seen that it *had* come upon her, and not by gradual degrees. She had come softly downstairs and inside the room, lest the baby slept, just in time to hear the dreadful sentence; and there she stood, transfixed and rigid, her eyes staring as wildly as the child's. That far-off horror, seen but at a distance, had come near—into her very home. Some instinct caused Harriet to look round; she saw her mistress, and shrieked out. Dr. Elliot raised his head, bounded forward, and caught her in his arms.

"Louisa! Good Heavens! I did not know you were there. My dearest wife! do not distress yourself; all will be well; it is not so bad as these women think. Louisa! Louisa!"

No, no, the dreadful shock had come to her, and nothing could soothe or soften it. When she recovered power of motion, she took the ill-fated child from the servant, laid its cheek against hers, and moaned as she swayed with it backwards and forwards. Suddenly she looked up at her husband—"If we could die—I and she—both of us!" she murmured, in a despairing, helpless sort of way, almost as if her own intellect was going.

It was indeed a fearful visitation, and it made itself heard in throbs of agony. Her brain was beating, her heart was working: care upon care, trouble upon trouble had followed her wilful marriage, and now the last and greatest comfort, the only joy that seemed left to her, had turned into a thing to be dreaded worse than death. She had so passionately wished for this child, and now that it was given, what was it? Her husband sat regarding her in gloomy silence, pitying her—she could see that—pitying the ill-fated child. Oh, if she could but undo her work and her disobedience; if she could but go back years, and be once more careless, happy, dutiful Louisa Freer! Not even Tom Elliot should tempt her away then.

How many, as her father said, have echoed the same useless prayer. Ill-doing first, repentance afterwards; but repentance can rarely, if ever, repair the ill-doing. All must bear the sorrows they bring upon themselves, even though they may end but with life; but it seemed to Louisa Elliot, in that first hour of her full affliction, aye, and for years afterwards, that her punishment was worse than had ever yet fallen upon woman.

CHAPTER XVI.

HALLIWELL HOUSE.

WE must return to Halliwell House—a distinct thing from The House of Halliwell. Halliwell House was the title which Hester and Lucy had chosen to bestow upon their new residence when they went into it, and we must see how they were getting on.

It cannot be said that they did not succeed; but they did not succeed sufficiently to pay their expenses, and their little capital was often drawn upon. Their number of pupils fluctuated much: one half-year they would have a tolerably good school, the next it would be small. Many an anxious conversation did they have, many an hour of more anxious thought, many a sleepless night. To sink into debt and difficulty; to spend the last shilling of their capital in striving to avert it, to find their efforts fruitless, their money gone, and they turned from their present shelter, from their slender means of living, without any definite prospect of finding another—these were the fears and the visions that disturbed their rest continually. Oh, God! pity and aid all who are struggling, as they were, to keep up appearances and earn a respectable living, and who find their means and their hopes grow less and less day by day!

“I have a scheme running in my head,” Lucy said one evening: “suppose we let lodgings?”

“Let lodgings!” exclaimed Hester.

“The drawing-room and one or two bed-rooms. We can give up our own and go upstairs, and there’s the one we fitted up for that parlour-boarder. Why not?”

“But it will not do to let lodgings in a ladies’ school,” returned Hester. “Such a thing was never heard of. All the parents would object to it.”

“Most of them would never know it,” said Lucy. “It cannot be any possible detriment to the pupils—can make no difference to them whatever. We might easily get thirty shillings a week for the three rooms, be at no outlay, and, if we had quiet people, it would be very little trouble.”

“Thirty shillings a week!” repeated Hester. “It would go far towards the rent. I will sleep upon it, Lucy.”

She did so. And the next day had some cards written in text-hand, intimating that two ladies wished to let a part of their house, and gave them to the stationers to display in their shops, for of course they could not exhibit such an announcement in their own windows.

The cards were out three weeks, and not a soul applied. But one day, Sarah, the servant, went to the school-room, and beckoned to her mistress.

"It's some folks after the rooms, ma'am," she whispered. "They look likely people." The girl was really as anxious as her mistresses.

Hester proceeded to the drawing-room, and two ladies rose at her entrance. Agreeable in person, and neatly dressed in mourning. The elder was about three or four-and-thirty, a rosy-cheeked woman, with quiet dark eyes; the younger, who was lighter and more delicate looking, was her sister.

"You have apartments to let, we hear," said the elder, presenting her card, "and we are in search of some."

Hester glanced at the card, and read "Mrs. Archer." "I beg your pardon," she said; "are you a widow?"

"No. My husband is abroad."

"Because we should decline to take a gentleman; it would hardly be suitable for a school. Only ladies."

"Well, he is abroad," the lady repeated; "it is only for ourselves. Can we see the rooms?"

"This is the sitting-room," said Hester, "and one bed-room opens from it. The other ——"

"We only require one bed-room," interrupted Mrs. Archer, as she rose to inspect it.

The bargain was soon concluded. They engaged the two rooms at twenty-five shillings a week, and promised to take possession on the morrow.

"What extras will there be?" inquired the younger lady, Miss Graves.

"Extras!" repeated Hester, "not any. Except—I believe it is customary—some little gratuity to the servant." She had not been in the habit of letting lodgings.

"What about the linen? are we to find it?" asked Lucy, when told of the success.

"The linen!" said Hester, dubiously; "I forgot it completely. I never said a word about it."

"Nor the ladies?"

"Nor the ladies. I remember they said they had their own spoons."

"Then they take it for granted we find it, no doubt. Well, it will not much matter, either way. Did you ask for references, Hester?"

She really had not, and was obliged to confess it. Lucy laughed. Hester, who was generally so over-cautious!

The ladies went in, and for some weeks things went on with satisfaction; they paid their rent regularly. Then they began to grow behindhand, and made excuses from time to time, which to Hester and Lucy sounded very plausible. But when the debt amounted to nearly £10, and still no money was coming forth, they grew uneasy. They had trusted to this to help them with the coming quarter's rent.

Hester was in the kitchen one morning, making apple-dumplings for dinner, when Sarah, who stood by, paring apples, began to talk.

"I think they are queer customers we have got hold of, ma'am," she said.

"What do you mean?" inquired her mistress.

"Well, for one thing, I fancy they have come to the end of their tether, and haven't neither cross nor coin to bless themselves with. They are living now upon a'most nothing. And where are their spoons gone to?"

"Their spoons!"

"The four table-spoons put on their table every day for dinner. It's a good month since the two first disappeared—that handsome silver cream-jug vanished about the same time—and now the two last is gone. When I was laying the cloth for dinner yesterday—they precious herrings they bought—I went on, a hunting for the spoons, and Miss Graves said, 'Oh, I have got them. I'll put them on the table myself presently, Sarah.' But none came down to be washed."

"Sarah! where do you think they have gone to?"

"Well," answered Sarah, who was worth her weight in gold for an honest, hard-working servant, though a free, rough-speaking one, "I should say they have pawned them."

"Dear, dear!" lamented Hester, for she did not affect to misunderstand her; "are they reduced to such straits as that?"

"Law, ma'am! let 'em hope they may never be reduced to no worse," retorted Sarah. "You don't know the schemes and contrivances for getting along in London, when one's hard up. It's a mercy there's such things to go to. Since the baker would not leave the bread on credit, our two ladies don't take in enough to feed 'em. They have not had meat, neither, for three days, nor nothing to substitute for it but them six herrings yesterday; which was anything but of the freshest. Miss Graves—it's she as generally speaks—is always ready with excuses: they have colds, and can't eat, or they've this, or that."

"Do they owe much to the baker?"

"Five shillings, odd. He's a cautious man, is our baker, and says he never trusts no lodgers. And now," added Sarah, stopping in her paring and looking at her mistress, "they don't take in any milk."

Hester went on, mixing her crust, and ruminating. She felt much sorrow for them, for she was sure they were not systematic deceivers; and she felt for herself. She looked upon the money as lost, and she wanted it badly.

"I should like to know what they mean to do for coals," resumed Sarah; "there ain't above a couple of scuttlefuls left. They'll be wanting us to lend 'em some, but if we do, we may whistle for 'em back again. Haven't I pared enough yet, ma'am?"

Hester had been paying no attention to the apples, and Sarah had done too many. So, to prevent waste, she determined to make a pie, and so use them up. Popping her dumplings, when they were ready, into the iron pot, she took down the flour-jar again.

Besides this, she had to slice and salt some red cabbage for pickling, so that it struck one o'clock before she had well finished. She told Sarah to dish up the dinner.

It happened to be Irish stew that day, and Sarah reached the large hash-dish and put it on the table, and then taking the saucepan from the fire, she turned the greater portion of its contents into the dish. Hester went into the pantry to put away some of the things she had been using, and just then Miss Graves entered the kitchen, nearly running against Sarah and her hash-dish, which she was carrying out.

Miss Graves went towards the fire, not seeing Hester. And oh! the pinching look of care and want that her face wore! It grieved Hester to the heart to see it, and she wondered she had never noticed it before. She looked with eager eyes into the saucepan, which Sarah had lodged, without its lid, on the fender, and then turned away, as if she would shut out its sight. On the table there lay a little heap of stew, splashed by Sarah when pouring it out, and she stole to the table, and caught this up greedily with her finger, and ate it. Hester heard Sarah coming back again, and had to come out of her hiding-place—not, indeed, that she had gone in to hide. Miss Graves started when she saw her, and her face flushed. Hester pretended not to have seen her until then.

"Is it you, ma'am?" she said. "What a cold day! Pray take care of your sleeve against the table: something seems to have been spilt on it. I hope it has not touched it."

"Oh, no," said Miss Graves, brushing away at her right-hand cuff with a nervous movement.

"Some of them young misses jumped about when they saw and smelt the Irish stew," observed Sarah, when she entered. "It's a rare favourite dish of theirs."

"I don't wonder at that, when it smells as savoury as yours," remarked Miss Graves.

"I looked a little to it myself to-day, and put in a bit of thyme: it's a great improvement," said Hester. "Don't you think so?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't think we ever put thyme in ours."

"Then if you'll allow me, I'll send you up a small plate of this to taste," said Hester. "For," she remarked to Lucy afterwards, "I could not bear to think that we were going to eat all we needed and that they should only smell and long for it."

"Oh, thank you," Miss Graves stammered, her face flushing again, "but—the trouble ——"

"Pray don't mention it," interrupted Hester; "it is no trouble. Sarah, bring in that little dish."

She took her place at the head of the school-room table, and Sarah, looking as demure as if she understood nothing, took in the dish. Hester heaped it up.

But of course they could not do that every day, and circumstances grew straiter with their lodgers. Sarah was fond of opening her budget of wonders, as to what they did, but Hester paid little heed to her. One evening, a day or two after the school had broken up for the Christmas holidays, she came bounding into the room, with eager, wild words. Hester and Lucy were sitting by fire-light, for it was the dusk hour before tea, and she startled them both, though she spoke in a whisper.

"Ma'am! Miss Lucy! as sure as you are both alive, them two have a man upstairs!"

"Who is he? What is he come for? Money, I suppose."

"Not that sort of a man," retorted Sarah, an indefinite amount of contempt in her tone for her mistress's simplicity—"not folks as call. A man locked up with 'em; concealed in their bed-room."

"How can you assert such a thing, Sarah?" exclaimed Lucy, sharply. "If they heard you, they might have you up before a police-court."

"Shouldn't care if they did," returned the girl. "I'd stand up for the truth there as well as here. If ever I heard a man talk, I heard one up in their room just now."

"Then you did not *see* him?" observed Lucy, sarcastically.

"Nor didn't want to, Miss Lucy, if you mean for convincing my eyes. I'll tell you, ma'am, how it was," she added, turning to her mistress—as Hester was always called. "Their candles be all out—the last pound have lasted 'em three weeks, if it have lasted one, so it's plain they have mostly sat in the dark. In getting the candlesticks out, just now, I remembered there was nothing to put in 'em, so up I went into the drawing-room to say so. The door was locked when I got there—and they have kept it so for the last few days, which is another odd thing, and took to making their own bed, which is odder still. I wasn't in a sunny humour—locking up rooms like that, indeed!—and I gave the latch a twist and a sharp push, and open it flew. In I went: there wasn't a bit of fire in the grate, but they have it now in their bed-room instead—I should like to know why. It was next to pitch dark, save a glimmer of light that came through the bed-room door, which was on the jar, and as I stood there a strange voice, a man's voice, called out, 'I am so thirsty! If there's nothing else, you must give me water. My lips and tongue are parched.'"

"Sarah, how can you be so foolish?" uttered Lucy. "Mrs. Archer speaks gruffly."

"A man's voice it was. I'll take my Bible oath on it," persisted

Sarah. "I ran against the table then, and caused a noise: not for the purpose: I was stepping softly forrard to peep in, and came in contract with one of its legs. Out flew Miss Graves, just as if I'd been a robber, and banged-to the door behind her.

"'Who's there?' she called out: for now the door was shut we couldn't see the ghost of one another.

"'It's only me, miss,' I answered. 'There ain't no candles left.'

"'Oh—well—I—I'll see about it,' she said. 'We don't want them yet; we are sitting by fire-light. How did you get in, Sarah? I thought I slipped the bolt: for when we are sitting by ourselves up here, and you all downstairs, we feel timid.'

"'You couldn't have slipped it very far, miss,' I said; 'I gave the door a smart push, and it opened. Of course I shouldn't have done it if I had known you'd fastened me out, but this is an awkward latch, and used to have a trick of catching, and I thought no more but what it was at it again.' So, with that, ma'am, I came away downstairs, and she came across the room and bolted the door again."

"Your ears heard double," cried Lucy. "You do fancy strange things sometimes, Sarah. Recollect the evening you came in to us last summer and protested Miss Brown was talking out of the front window. And she fast asleep in her bed all the time at the back of the house."

"That Miss Brown had as many ruses as a fox," uttered Sarah, "and I shall never believe but what she was talking out at the front winder; and to somebody over the wall, too! However, she's gone, so it don't matter; but, whether or no, I ain't mistaken now, and I'll lay my life there is a man up there."

Lucy raised the fire into a blaze, which lighted up the amused, incredulous smile on her face. But Hester was staggered. The girl was so very earnest, and she knew she had her share of strong common-sense.

"It was a gentleman's voice," she resumed, "and he spoke as if he was tired, or else in pain. Suppose I go and borrow the next door ladder, and climb up to their winder, and have a look in?"

"Yes," cried Lucy, laughing heartily as she put down the poker, "do, Sarah. Never mind falls."

"What can I say we want with it? They'll think night's a queer time to borrow a garden ladder. Suppose I go with a tale that an obstinate fit has took our curtains, and they won't draw, and I want to get up to the rings? It is ——"

"Do not run on so, Sarah," interrupted her mistress; "you know I should permit nothing of the sort. And if the blind is down, as it is almost sure to be, you could not see into the room if you did get up to the window."

"I'll go and see," was Sarah's answer, as she darted into the hall and thence to the garden.

"It is down," she said, returning again. "But just come and look here, Miss Lucy. If there isn't the shadow of a man's hat on the blind, I never saw a hat yet."

They went out into the cold night, and Hester followed them. There really was the outline of a man's hat thrown upon the blind. It seemed as if the little bamboo table had been drawn from the corner of the room—to get at the cupboard, probably—and was placed in front of the window. On it stood the hat, and the opposite fire-light threw its shadow on the blind. As they looked, the form of one of the ladies passed before the window and lifted the table back to its place, out of sight, and Hester and Lucy went shivering into the house again.

"Now, ma'am, what do you think?" asked Sarah, triumphantly.

"Why I think that someone has called," resolutely replied Hester. "The ladies are most respectable in their conduct; perfectly so: it is impossible to think otherwise. You may have been out of the way when he—whoever it is—came to the door, and one of them must have come down and let him in. As to his being in the bed-room, it is natural they should be where the fire is, this cold night."

"Not a soul has been to the door this afternoon," persisted Sarah. "I have been ironing, and have never stirred out of the kitchen. But now, ma'am, to prove the thing, I'll just turn the key of the front door, and put it in my pocket. If it is a visitor, he must ask to be let out; if it's not——"

Sarah said no more. For who should have entered, after a tap at the door, but Miss Graves. She held a tea-cup in her hand.

"I am very sorry to trouble you, Miss Halliwell," she said, hesitatingly—she was a bad beggar—"but would you oblige us with a little tea to-night? We are out of it, and it is late to go and purchase any."

"Certainly," answered Hester, pleasantly, rising to unlock the old sideboard drawer, where she kept her tea-caddy. "Nothing is so refreshing as a cup of tea."

"We don't in general care for it," observed Miss Graves, "but my sister is very poorly to-night, and complains of thirst. Thank you greatly," she added, taking the cup from Hester.

"Don't you want water for it, ma'am?" called out Sarah. "Our kettle is on the boil."

"Yes, if you please," she answered. "I will come into the kitchen and make it now."

She did so, having a contest with Sarah afterwards. The latter wanted to carry up the tray with the cups and saucers, but Miss Graves insisted on doing it herself.

"To keep me out of the room," muttered Sarah when she was gone. "For fear I should see what I should see."

However, in about half-an-hour the bell rang, and up bounded

Sarah. It was to take away the tray ; and when she had put it in the kitchen she went into the parlour again, where Hester and Lucy were now at their tea.

"Well, what did you see?" inquired Lucy.

"Nothing, ma'am ; and didn't expect to," was Sarah's sulky reply. "They took care of that before they called me up."

"Did you go into the bed-room?"

"Yes. Miss Graves was sitting at the table, as if she'd been making tea; and Mrs. Archer was by the fire, looking well enough, as far as I saw by fire-light. They had stirred the blaze up just as I went in, as an excuse for having no candles."

"And what about the gentleman?" laughed Lucy.

"I expect he was in the bed, or on it, for the curtains was all drawn close round it as tight as wax, like I have never seen 'em before. I'm sure, ma'am, this affair's as good as a play."

"Not to me," sighed Hester, "if there should be anything in it."

"And the hat?" continued Lucy.

"Well, I was stupid there. I was so struck with them curtains—picturing what was inside 'em, and peering if there wasn't a slit as big as a needle to look through, that I never thought of the hat or the table. But don't you flatter yourself it was there, Miss Lucy ; they'd take precious good care to put it away afore they rang for me. I've a notion the man must be ill."

"Why so?"

"Because I heard him say he was parched, as I told you, ma'am. And then, their having the tea! That wasn't for Mrs. Archer ; there's no more the matter with her than there is with me. Besides, who's the toast-and-water for? They told me to make a quart-jug full, and Miss Graves said she'd come down and fetch it."

They heard no more that night of the strange visitor. If he was there, he remained, for Sarah carried out her threat, and put the key of the front door in her pocket. The next morning Hester went into the kitchen to give orders.

"Look here, ma'am," cried Sarah, exhibiting some meat upon a plate.

"Miss Graves has been out and brought in this bit of scrag of mutton and them two turnips, and she said she supposed you'd oblige 'em with a bit of parsley out of the garden. It's to make some broth for her sister, she said, and they'll stew it upstairs ; and I'm to take it up with the saucepan of water. Not more than sixpence she couldn't have gave for it," concluded Sarah, taking up the meat with an action of contempt, and flapping it down on the plate again.

"Sarah, you are unfeeling," exclaimed her mistress, reprovingly. "The poor ladies are much to be pitied."

"Pitied, indeed! What business have they in a house like ours, with no money to carry 'em on in it?" retorted Sarah, who was in one of her worst humours. "And the man they have up there—perhaps he is to be pitied, too!"

"I must forbid further allusion to that absurdity, Sarah. There is no man up there ; the very idea is preposterous."

"Very well, ma'am. If anything bad turns up out of this, don't say I did not give warning of it. One on 'em slept on the sofa in the drawing-room last night, for I see the bed-clothes there this morning. I think that proves something."

The girl tossed her head, and went out of the kitchen. Hester felt uneasy all that day ; but nothing fresh arose. Night came, and Lucy, who had a bad cold (caught through flying out the previous night to stare at their window), went to bed at nine o'clock. At ten Hester sent Sarah, sitting up herself to finish a little sewing that she had in hand. After that she sat warming her feet, and it was upon the stroke of eleven when she rose to go to bed.

She had the candle in one hand, and her work in the other, and was going softly up the stairs, when the drawing-room door was flung violently open, and out dashed Mrs. Archer, nearly knocking Hester and her load down together.

(To be continued.)



SONNET.

I saw Prometheus in a torrid clime,
Up barren heights and wild, where never flock
Had grazed—lone sufferer chained to his lone rock,
'Twixt heav'n and earth—dread emblem of man's crime,
Eternally defying Jove and Time.
Day's sun, night's dews, the vulture's beak I saw
Him calmly bear ; and my soul filled with awe,
For that stern calm had something of sublime
That bore me up, as on a lofty thought
We soar with pinion strong, nor look below
At lessening earth.—Prometheus, thou hast bought
Thy Godhead at man's price ; mind wed to woe,
And in thy Pagan legend still we see
Immortal soul—suffering humanity.

JULIA KAVANAGH.

HER ONLY CHANCE.

LAURA LESLIE left school with a firm determination to get on in life, to inspire her neighbours with a species of respectful admiration, and ultimately to conquer for herself by matrimony a certain position in the great world which she felt so eminently fitted to adorn.

Let us briefly enumerate her advantages. She was well born and well educated—in the narrow sense of having passed innumerable examinations in the most creditable manner. A fair, smiling face and expressive blue eyes rendered her the incalculable service of effectually masking a hard, business-like little heart under a soft, sympathetic garb. A tall, slim figure lent her that air of natural distinction which is so invaluable to a young woman bent on making a mark in the world. Finally, Laura was an only child, for which fact she felt that she could never be sufficiently thankful. No awkward, long-legged brothers, always getting into mischief and running up heavy bills at college! No inconvenient younger sisters, clamouring for their share of new dresses and admiration! It is to be doubted whether she even felt her mother's early death to be an unmitigated evil. At all events she thoroughly appreciated the independence consequent upon her forlorn condition.

Laura soon found that she had to contend with one great difficulty in her father's habits. Mr. Leslie (although descended from a perfectly genuine earl, as Laura often reminded herself) was an unworldly old bookworm, who shuffled about during the greater part of the day in carpet slippers and a loose alpaca coat, equally indifferent to the rival claims upon his attention of his daughter and his parish, so long as they did not interfere with his favourite hobby.

But even worse than the carpet slippers and the slovenly early dinners in which the old gentleman had revelled undisturbed for so many years, was his unsophisticated trick of making friends with all sorts of odd people, quite outside the pale of society, provided they struck him as interesting companions.

Mr. Croft, for instance, who had lately taken the Hall Farm, and of whom until then they had never heard. As far as Laura could make out her father was in the habit of associating with him on terms of perfect equality—a state of things which should certainly not continue if she could help it!

For Mr. Croft, as far as they knew, was of no more social standing in the world than any of the other farmers in the neighbourhood. Not that she had seen the man yet, for he happened to be away from Westford at the time of her return. But she could fancy him easily: some aggressive old churchwarden, whose prosy pedantry had deluded

her father into the belief that he had at last lighted upon a kindred spirit.

The first struggle took place across the breakfast table, over which Laura was presiding in a pretty spring frock, looking the very picture of guileless girlhood as she carefully poured out her father's tea and helped him to his daily boiled egg.

"Thank you, my dear," said the old gentleman dreamily, looking up from the large volume reposing by the side of his plate. "I have had a note from Croft; here it is—no, that's not it. Nor that either. Well, I must have mislaid it, then. How very singular! I made sure that it was in my hand a minute ago!"

"Oh, that is impossible, papa! Besides, you know you are always losing things! But, at any rate, you can remember the contents of this wonderful note!"

"Nothing important, my dear; at least in one sense. He wished to show me a catalogue of books he came across the other day; a unique list from all accounts, but nothing that will interest you, I fear. So I asked him to bring it this evening, and ——"

"Do you mean to say you asked him to *dinner*, papa?" interrupted Laura, icily.

"Yes, I suppose so, my dear," was the somewhat vague reply. Mr. Leslie was fast relapsing into oblivion.

Laura felt keenly that the moment had arrived when she ought to assert herself once for all, but she was a little disconcerted by her father's serene unconsciousness of offence. She was rather too much afraid of him to risk a direct collision, and in spite of his sleepy ways she felt instinctively that his scorn would not be a pleasant thing to encounter. Still, it was very clear that something must be done.

"Papa," she began, hesitatingly.

"Yes, my dear," replied Mr. Leslie, without raising his eyes from his book.

"Don't you think the poor man will feel rather out of his element dining here to-night?"

"Why, my dear? He has done so often before."

"Ah, but that was rather different," murmured Laura, with a desperate but carefully repressed longing to shake her poor old parent into a livelier sense of the conventionalities.

"I daresay he won't mind dining late," Mr. Leslie went on; "in fact, I fancy he does so at home. But we shall want a long evening to compare his catalogue with the one they sent me from town. You must amuse yourself with your needlework, my dear, whilst we talk."

Laura sighed deeply, shrugged her shoulders, and went on with her breakfast.

"Poor papa is incorrigible," she thought. "I must direct my attack against the monster in person. Unless he is the obtusest of mankind he will feel too uncomfortable ever to reappear at the vicarage."

With this thoroughly hospitable intention, Laura exhausted her somewhat limited resources in devising a smart little dinner, which would, she hoped, impress forcibly upon Mr. Croft the difference between vicarage and farmhouse habits. For a time she hesitated over her choice of a dress; perhaps it would be most cutting to ignore the presence of a visitor altogether, and appear in her oldest and shabbiest attire.

But after all, Laura was only nineteen and had some of the weaknesses of her sex, although tempered with an unusual amount of discretion. So she finally proved to herself satisfactorily that her wisest course would be to annihilate poor Mr. Croft by the elegance of her person as well as by the refinement of her surroundings.

"If he has any sense at all, he will feel like that proverbial bull in a china shop," she thought rather spitefully, being annoyed at the waste of a clean muslin frock. For Laura's best frocks were few and far between; still as she sensibly reflected, her opportunities of wearing them were not numerous; and even a hopelessly unappreciative bucolic audience is better than none. Thus she sailed into the drawing-room, mercilessly resolved to pulverise the unfortunate visitor with her scorn, but not altogether averse to permitting him one glance at his hostess's unrivalled charms before flying vanquished from the field!

Exactly two minutes of Mr. Croft's society were sufficient to dispel this pleasing vision. Good-looking, self-possessed and irreproachably dressed in evening clothes, he was a very different person to the clumsy rustic that Laura had anticipated. Stunned by this discovery, she actually found herself listening with a pleased smile to Mr. Croft's admiring comments on the flowers before she realised how conspicuously she had failed in playing her part. Here was this objectionable stranger (for his veneer of good manners, if one came to think of it, rather intensified the awkwardness of the situation) not only appearing perfectly at home amidst his superior surroundings, but even presuming to set his hostess at ease, as if she were merely a shy school-girl.

Laura could have cried with vexation, but she pulled herself together, and anxiously awaited the moment when, by some false step, he should lay himself open to the crushing snub which she was longing to administer. In the meantime, she was forced to admit that he was much more interesting than the generality of their friends. Perhaps it was accounted for by his having lived abroad, though it was a revelation to Laura that colonial life had such a refining effect.

"Why did you come home?" she found herself asking with genuine interest.

"A variety of reasons, among which several aged and affectionate relatives figured largely, obliged me to return. Besides, it was a very rough life."

"I wonder that you minded that, as you were brought up to it,"

she could not help saying. This cool assumption of equality was intolerable.

Mr. Croft looked amused. "You are a wonderful judge of character," he said. "Candidly, I did *not* mind it in the least. Still, it is pleasant to be in civilised society again." Then he turned to Mr. Leslie with some apposite remark, which started the old gentleman off on one of his favourite hobbies.

If by any chance Mr. Croft found a dainty little dinner, presided over by a charmingly pretty hostess, preferable to a dish of mutton chops dispensed by a prosy old bookworm, he was far too prudent to show it. For the remainder of the evening he confined his attention to Mr. Leslie, which unexpected manœuvre annoyed the cool Laura more than she cared to confess.

But this was by no means the last that she was destined to see of her foe. Unsubdued by her stately bearing and studiously distant manners, he continued his frequent visits at the vicarage, and insisted with so much quiet pertinacity upon a friendly recognition of his presence, that Laura gradually laid down her arms and drifted with the stream.

The last barrier was broken down on the day when she was weak enough to accept his offer of a horse. He had once before mentioned in a tentative way that it would be very pleasant for the Vicar to have a companion on his solitary rides, and that his own bay mare carried a lady; but she had deliberately ignored the suggestion, foreseeing that it must lead to increased intimacy. After a time, however, the monotony of existence in the country broke even her proud spirit. She had chilled the advances of their few neighbours, on the unanswerable grounds that she did not take the slightest interest in either hearing or retailing local gossip—a lofty sentiment, which, being translated, meant that she had no intention of associating with the doctor's wife or the solicitor's daughters, who represented all the available society of the place. On the other hand, by the time one has weeded out all such of one's country neighbours as might correctly be termed "common-place," one is apt to find oneself the proud centre of a refined solitude. Such was the case with Laura.

In spite of the depressing fact that the county families took not the slightest notice of her return home, she still hoped that by dint of keeping her humbler surroundings at a distance she might gradually work into the circle in which she mentally classed herself. She often quoted a favourite maxim of a worldly old aunt's, with whom she had spent most of her holidays, to the effect that every girl had at least one chance of getting on in life if she only left herself free to embrace it. Laura firmly resolved to act up to this pleasing idea of Aunt Augusta's. In the meantime life was abominably dull, and in the absence of all witnesses it did not appear such an unpardonable indiscretion to ignore the question of social dis-

parity in the solitary instance of Mr. Croft. Besides, she comforted herself with the gracious thought that she could always shake him off if she really wished it.

"I would not run the risk if he had any female relatives to take advantage of my weakness," she thought. "Not even for the sake of a ride. But I can trust myself to keep the man in his place."

Thus she stifled the voice of conscience, ever warning her in the accents of Aunt Augusta, that she was diverging from the path of duty and abandoning her former high standard.

The first ride was so pleasant that Laura soon forgot her scruples, and yielded herself to the full enjoyment of the present. Mr. Croft led the mare up to the vicarage himself, and suggested indifferently that perhaps he had better accompany them a little way to see how she behaved. Oddly enough he did not turn back, although her conduct proved irreproachable. Laura's knowledge of riding was limited to a few lessons she had taken during her visits to Scarborough, so she was not sufficiently at her ease to indulge in any sharp speeches. As for the Vicar, he was always fond of a patient listener, and experience was beginning to teach him that outsiders were, as a rule, far more attentive to his long-winded discourses than his pretty daughter. Laura smiled and said, "Yes, papa," in the nicest manner at stated intervals during his explanations, still it was obvious that she took but a languid interest in archaeological discoveries, and was lukewarm even on the all-absorbing topic of old manuscripts. Plainly a sympathetic stranger who could appreciate both sides of the difficulty was an invaluable addition to this family party.

"I sometimes think that you hardly value your father's learning as you should," observed Mr. Croft one day whilst they were waiting outside a cottage where the Vicar was visiting a sick child. The first ride had been succeeded by many others, and Laura had insensibly glided into a close friendship with the once-despised tenant of the Hall Farm. She did not resent his straightforward criticism of her conduct; indeed she tacitly acknowledged the truth of the accusation.

"I suppose papa really knows a great deal," she answered; "but he doesn't contrive to communicate his learning in a very palatable form. Doesn't he remind you of a dictionary? Now some clever people are so different!"

The words were scarcely spoken when she was struck by the absurdity of the situation. Here was she, seriously discussing with the tenant of the Hall Farm a subject upon which by the nature of things he must necessarily be ignorant.

How could he possibly decide between the contending claims of highly-educated people? No wonder he was immensely impressed by her father's prosy conversation, as probably he had never even associated with a University man before.

"How absurd! I am treating him exactly like an equal," she thought, and tried to laugh. But candour compelled her to add: "No wonder; he is an equal, practically a superior, in all that is worth knowing."

Obviously if this kind of thing had gone on much longer, Aunt Augusta's pupil would have been hopelessly demoralised. But at this opportune moment a piece of news from the outer world broke in upon Laura's day dreams, and rudely awoke her to a sense of her danger.

"Have you heard that my landlord is expected at the Hall?" inquired Mr. Croft one morning as he met her outside the vicarage gate.

"What! Sir Gilbert is not coming home!"

"Yes, indeed, and Miss Coventry. They say she has taken a great dislike to their place in Norfolk, and under those circumstances we may expect to see a good deal of them here, for she entirely rules her father. My informant," he added, smiling, "is Mrs. Smith at the shop, but as she was formerly a servant at the Hall, no doubt she knows all about it. Now I hope you have nothing to do this afternoon, because I have come to arrange with your father about that long ride over the hills we have so often talked of trying."

"I am afraid that I cannot possibly manage it as I have an engagement," began Laura, stiffly. "Perhaps papa will like to come with you."

"What nonsense. You know he is perfectly indifferent to views, and infinitely prefers a ride along the hard road, as affording fewer interruptions to conversation. But of course your engagement is a movable one; only yesterday you were sighing for the hills."

"Indeed it is quite impossible," reiterated Miss Leslie, with so much decision that her companion fairly stared at her in astonishment; then with a formal bow, sauntered out at the gate and home, beguiling the journey with morose reflections on the wonderful ways of women.

As he strolled along he busied himself vainly in trying to evolve some reasonable explanation of Laura's strange behaviour. Probably, after all, she was only a little shy or out of temper (as it happened she never gave way to either of these human weaknesses). At any rate, he might have tried the effect of a little judicious coaxing, instead of striding away at the first rebuff, like a sulky bear. He had half a mind to return to the vicarage, but thinking better of it, went out and blew up the farm-bailiff for wasting his time; a proceeding which hurt nobody and acted as a safety valve. Little did he imagine that he had uttered his own death warrant; that Laura's blue eyes had taken in the whole situation at a glance, and her pretty, scheming head at once decided how to act. With the return of the Coventrys she saw a natural opening into that society which she had always coveted; only it would never do for them to find her

fast friends with their own tenant. With laudable strength of mind she resolved to break with Mr. Croft at once.

"It is very unpleasant, but it must be done," she said firmly, and then fell into a brilliant day-dream, in which she saw herself established as Miss Coventry's bosom friend, and taking a conspicuous part in all the entertainments to be given at the Hall. And then what illimitable possibilities for the future she foresaw!

"For if papa is really as clever as they say, he may some day become a bishop," she reflected; "and a bishop's daughter is equal to anybody!"

As it happened, Laura was personally acquainted with only one bishop's daughter, and she had recently married the eldest son of a peer; so she naturally ranked their advantages rather highly.

"But I daresay he would not accept it if he got the chance," she added gloomily. "At least, not if he had to alter his ways and forsake his old carpet slippers and alpaca coat, which would look slightly incongruous in a palace! I must contrive to impress upon the Coventrys that his eccentricities are those of a literary man, and then let him quietly slip into the background. It is hard that papa, with his connections and talents, should be so little use! I might almost as well be a foundling! Aunt Augusta is too much of an invalid to help; besides, she never leaves Scarborough. So I must rely entirely upon myself, and undoubtedly my first step will be to make friends with the Coventrys."

In making this very sensible resolution Laura had not paid sufficient attention to one important item, namely, a reciprocity of interests on the part of Miss Coventry. To her intense disappointment, that young lady received her advances coolly and without any demonstrations of rapture at the discovery of a congenial spirit. Miss Coventry was already a favourite of Fortune, rich, handsome, and well-connected. She stood in no need of Laura, and she showed it unmistakably in her manner.

The first interview, somehow, was not a success. Laura, after expending much superfluous energy on smartening up the old Vicar sufficiently to accompany her on a formal call, was glad when it was over. Miss Coventry was certainly exquisitely pretty; prettier than herself, Laura reluctantly admitted; but they never got beyond the merest platitudes, and all Laura's efforts at an approach to intimacy met with no response. Yet throughout the interview Miss Coventry's manner was so courteous, and her bearing so perfect, that it was impossible to take the slightest offence at her somewhat distant manner.

Mr. Leslie had fared far better with Sir Gilbert, a pompous but kindly old gentleman, much interested in the condition of the Highway Board, and such local topics. Laura could not help wishing that Miss Coventry had taken more after her father. Still she had the presence of mind to describe the inmates of the Hall as "quite

charming, and such pleasant neighbours!" to the doctor's wife, who had not yet summoned up courage to call, and who forthwith propagated the pleasing fiction that Miss Leslie and Miss Coventry were in a fair way of becoming quite inseparable!

Laura's sole thought now was how to convert this fictitious intimacy into a substantial reality. She brooded over the idea until the words "Miss Coventry" and "social success" seemed almost convertible terms in her mind. If Sir Gilbert happened to speak to her coming out of church, or his daughter nodded across the road, it sent her home in a whirl of pleasant anticipations. At the same time, she contrived to avoid any meetings with Mr. Croft, wisely preferring this negative method of eluding the difficulty to a more open breach of the peace. But she missed him horribly at times, in spite of a self-approving conscience, finding Miss Coventry's frigid greetings but a poor substitute for the merry rides and confidential talks which a strong sense of duty compelled her reluctantly to forego for the future.

This state of things continued for some weeks, when Laura was at last rewarded for her sacrifices by receiving (in common with about two hundred other people) an invitation to a garden party at the Hall. Eagerly she read and re-read the formal card, as if there were something peculiarly fascinating about the brief statement that Miss Coventry would be at home from four to seven on the following Thursday.

To her indomitably hopeful disposition this slight civility seemed likely to inaugurate a new era. Here at last was the opportunity she desired for soaring above her petty surroundings and taking her first step up the social ladder. With unwearied patience she rehearsed every detail of her part, omitting no trifling accessory of dress or deportment which might contribute to her success.

"One thing I certainly want," she thought regretfully, as she wandered along the overgrown paths of the rambling, neglected old garden on the eve of the eventful day. "It is so awkward going about without any regular chaperon; quite a disadvantage to a girl, in my opinion. If only poor mamma had lived!"

A crashing sound broke in upon her reveries, and before she had time to fly, Mr. Croft was off his horse and shaking hands with her across the hedge.

"I had no intention of coming this way until I saw you," he explained, "but I daresay you will let me use the short cut through the garden."

Before she could reply they were walking, side by side, down the shady path, the bay mare snuffling sympathetically at her master's shoulder as she followed them.

Needless to say that Laura was profoundly embarrassed by this unexpected meeting. She rapidly calculated that at the pace they were walking it must be several minutes before they reached the house. If

only her companion would speak, the situation would be so much more bearable! To relieve the intolerable constraint, she turned slightly back and stroked the mare's soft nose.

"Poor Kitty, do you want some sugar?"

"She is getting used to doing without it," rejoined Mr. Croft softly. "Like all pleasant things, the sugar didn't last long."

"I don't know what you mean," stammered Laura, flushing scarlet but assuming an air of dignified unconsciousness.

"Then you are rather wanting in your usual penetration to-day, Miss Leslie! I don't think my meaning was very obscure. I was only alluding to a recent personal experience."

Poor Laura was beside herself with annoyance at being drawn into such a discussion. She turned away her head, biting her lips to keep back bitter tears of mortification.

Mr. Croft, looking up suddenly, perceived her agitation and, completely misunderstanding its origin, was seized with compunction. This then was the explanation of her strange manner and inexplicable avoidance of his society! Her character instantly acquired a new charm in his eyes, and the pathetic expression of wounded feeling which he fancied he read in her face added a singular charm to its ordinary calm prettiness.

"What a fool I am!" he ejaculated mentally; then aloud: "Forgive me, Miss Leslie. I never meant to distress you. I had no idea that you minded what I said. You are not angry with me?"

Laura struggled hard to reply, but her wonted self-command completely forsook her. She could only drop her eyes helplessly beneath his keen glance. The childish misery of her quivering little mouth stirred Mr. Croft completely out of his indifferent attitude of critical admiration.

"Wait one moment, Laura," he exclaimed, seizing her firmly by the hand as she started back. "You must stop and hear me. I have made rather a mess of things in general, I am afraid, but if you will trust me, I know I can make you happy ——"

At this point Laura suddenly recovered her presence of mind, and abruptly terminated the interview by wrenching away her hand, and darting off across the lawn towards the house, never pausing to take breath until she found herself in her own room. By this bold move Mr. Croft was left to the company of his mare, and felt, it must be owned, a trifle foolish. He considered for a moment what to do next. Pursuit was obviously impossible, as the most ardent lover would hesitate before dragging his horse across his prospective father-in-law's lawn, especially when the aforesaid lawn was overlooked by half-a-dozen windows. And it would be misleading to describe Mr. Croft as a very ardent lover. No man had ever started out with less intention of making an offer in the course of the afternoon. A sudden impulse of affectionate pity had landed him in this novel

position. Still he was a conscientious man, and quite aware that he had said either too much or too little.

"Poor little girl, how shy she is!" he thought, as he softly reopened the gate he had just come through and slipped back into the wood. "Who would ever have imagined that she had so much feeling under her demure manner! But I should enjoy myself more if I had settled the affair straight off instead of having to begin again to-morrow!"

Mr. Croft probably congratulated himself more than once, in after life, upon the fact that mortals are not always granted the immediate fulfilment of their wishes.

II.

LAURA rose on the following morning feeling equally exhausted in body and mind—a not unusual result of a sleepless night devoted to meditation. Lamentable to relate, it was all so much time and energy wasted, for she had resolved upon nothing. Mr. Croft's sudden development in the character of a lover had revealed many things to her understanding. Amongst others, the imminent risk she ran of falling away from her cherished ideal. She had broken down at the point where she deemed herself impregnable, and bid fair at this rate to swell the ranks of imbecile sentimentalists who marry for love to the exclusion of all other considerations. It was a desperate temptation to cast prudence and county society aside for ever and to throw in her lot with the man who simply promised to make her happy!

Apart from his position, Mr. Croft was certainly nicer than anybody else. She had a melancholy conviction that she should never meet so many personal charms united to an appropriate social standing. Still, poor Laura distinctly realised that it was a temptation to be fought against, and very bravely did she struggle with her inclinations. By the afternoon her mind was irrevocably made up, though the process had completely banished all pleasant anticipations of the impending party.

"If he were even a curate or a doctor, it would be a different thing," she thought; "but, as it is, he has literally *no* position. People might not even call on us! No, I could not stand it for any man! I may be miserable, but I shall not lose my self-respect," she added, mechanically examining the back of her new hat in the glass. "No doubt my chance will come some day, and then I shall be rewarded for my prudence."

In the meantime she felt very wretched, and the reception awaiting her at the Hall was hardly calculated to dispel her gloomy thoughts.

Miss Coventry made an effective hostess. Perfectly dressed in a subtle combination of soft lace and muslin, which made every other garment present look commonplace or clumsy, she received her

visitors with an indifferent dignity which at once repelled and fascinated Laura. In spite of rebuffs, she still admired her paragon inordinately, and would have enjoyed beyond measure behaving in exactly the same manner if she ever had the opportunity. Soured by all that she had lately gone through, Laura could imagine no bliss greater than that of ultimately climbing to a position from which she could look down with calm indifference on the perpetual struggle for precedence that went on around her. With what enviable coolness Miss Coventry ignored the superior claims to distinction of the little local dignitaries: regarding the whole scene from such a height that all petty inequalities were lost to sight. Laura never dreamed that in other scenes Miss Coventry herself might be reduced to pushing for a place like the most obsequious of her humble admirers. She concluded that the wearing struggle for recognition would cease when one was once assured of an acknowledged position in the county: a conclusion which amply proved her real ignorance of human nature.

On recalling this garden party in after years, Laura felt convinced that it had been one of the most unpleasant experiences of her life. She occupied an ambiguous position between the comfortably dowdy country neighbours, who, attired in their Sunday dresses, were exchanging profound confidences concerning the state of the barometer, and the group of personal friends who had rallied round Miss Coventry. Now Laura had let it be generally understood that she was on a very intimate footing at the Hall. The neighbours commonly assumed that she and Miss Coventry were completely absorbed in each other's society, and, to say the least, she had taken no pains to correct this erroneous impression. It was therefore extremely mortifying that on the first opportunity that arose for demonstrating her superiority, she should find herself unmistakably excluded from the charmed circle. She felt indescribably annoyed at perceiving that her discomfiture was giving evident enjoyment to the surrounding spectators. For instance, the doctor's wife, a kind-hearted person but not at all above human weaknesses, accosted her in a slightly patronising manner that was directly traceable to her indifferent reception.

"I see you feel just as great a stranger as the rest of us," said Mrs. Hall, attempting at the same time to slip her arm through Laura's, a familiarity which the latter firmly resisted. "It is the first time I have been inside the gates, and I mean to see all I can. Perhaps you know some of the visitors and can tell me their names?"

Thus pressed, Laura was reluctantly forced to admit her ignorance, an admission which was followed by an increasing familiarity on Mrs. Hall's part.

"Never mind, my dear; we shall do very well, though they don't introduce us to all their grand friends! You keep close to me and we shall be as independent as possible. Why, I do believe that is

your friend Mr. Croft coming towards us!" broke off the old lady in a tone of some excitement. "But of course you expected him!"

"Indeed I did not!" contradicted Laura, with rather excusable vehemence. Mrs. Hall had a way of putting things which at times was well nigh intolerable. Besides, the sight of Mr. Croft was in itself a shock. She had never pictured him at a garden-party, and felt a vague curiosity respecting his attitude towards the other guests. Although, with the aid of a white tulle veil and lace parasol, she contrived to conceal her excitement from observation, she was in reality trembling all over with contending emotions. Long before she had perfectly recovered her equanimity, Mr. Croft was standing beside them, smiling imperturbably at Mrs. Hall's patronising reception. That good lady's loudly-expressed astonishment at the unexpected meeting appeared to arouse in him no sense of irritation. He acquiesced cheerfully in her gushing admiration of all the arrangements. He even admitted with a suitable show of gratitude that it was wonderfully kind of Sir Gilbert to have sent him an invitation.

And Laura listened with ever-increasing disappointment. When she had first seen him advancing across the lawn, her heart had glowed with a sudden hope that after all she had been mistaken in her former estimate of his position. She would willingly have grasped at the faintest show of reason for reversing her decision. If he could only have claimed acquaintance with any of the more distinguished guests, or even have shown a certain amount of lofty contempt for Mrs. Hall's ridiculous patronage, it would have told greatly in his favour. As it was, he did neither. Mrs. Hall's remarks were received with so much respectful attention, and he appeared so thoroughly satisfied with his present companions, that Laura, naturally judging from her own conduct under similar circumstances, felt more than ever convinced that she represented his only friend among the large gathering.

The fact that his conversation was unusually animated and amusing did not influence her feelings in the least. She had long since ceased to have any doubts respecting his personal attractions; what she in vain sighed for was some public recognition of his social importance. It is certain that by a few well-timed allusions and judicious references, Mr. Croft could easily have ensured his success with Laura. As it was, the origin of her perpetual vacillations never once struck him.

"All our instincts are different," thought Miss Leslie in despair. "I could never settle down quietly with a man who is perfectly content to be seen with that horrid little woman all the afternoon, and who takes her offensive patronage as merely a matter of course!"

As if in corroboration of this theory, she heard Mr. Croft the next moment affirming that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to accompany Mrs. Hall on a tour of inspection round the garden.

"I quite agree with you that it would be best to investigate everything thoroughly now that we have the chance," he continued, smiling slightly at Laura, who instantly averted her head. "Surely you think so too, Miss Leslie?"

"Go by all means, if it amuses you; I am much too tired to walk about," was the indifferent reply, uttered the more frigidly because at that moment a break in the crowd revealed Miss Coventry a few paces off, contemplating the trio with some interest.

"Too tired!" echoed Mr. Croft rather blankly. "But if you come this way we can find some seats under the cedars." Obviously, the prospect of a solitary ramble with Mrs. Hall was damping even to his cheerful spirits. But Laura was firm in her resolution to remain near the band—listening to the music, she declared, tired her less than talking. She was not in the habit of wasting much sympathy over other people's petty annoyances, and it was with an unmitigated sense of relief that she at last saw Mr. Croft disappear among the trees. Mrs. Hall was apparently much elated at securing a listener, and might be trusted not to relinquish him until she had imparted all the information she possessed regarding the history of those present. Laura had every reason to hope that she had seen the last of them both, for that day, at least. She was fast becoming irritable with annoyance, and felt a strange inclination to go home and cry comfortably, instead of running the chance of any further disappointments. A gleam of light broke through the clouds when Miss Coventry approached her, accompanied by an unknown gentleman.

"You are alone," she began, addressing Laura with an unusually gracious smile; "and Major Sutton knows nobody. I wish you would try and entertain each other. I am so sorry that I have to make myself generally useful to-day, and cannot devote myself to anyone in particular."

Now the Major was stout, and bald, and prosy; in short, he would have been pronounced detestable, coming from any other quarter. As it was, Laura greeted him with her sweetest smile, and ruthlessly compressed her muslin skirts to make room for him on the seat.

"Beautiful country this of yours," he began, condescendingly, as if she ought to be personally indebted to him for the flattering admission. "But don't you find it a great bore being so many hours from town?"

She acquiesced plaintively, although in point of fact she had never spent above a couple of days in London in her life, but she would have perished sooner than have admitted such a discreditable circumstance.

"But I suppose you find lots to do getting up school-treats and looking after the old women," continued her companion, with patronising kindness.

"Indeed, I don't!" flared up Laura, for once speaking the literal truth. "I don't go in for that sort of thing at all!"

"Really! I always imagined that young ladies in the country spent most of their time distributing cans of soup and collecting clothing club tickets! Do you actually mean to say you are an exception to this rule? Then may I ask who looks after these things; for I presume they flourish in your parish even though you hold yourself aloof from them?"

"The schoolmistress manages it, I suppose. I take no interest in such matters."

This conversation was by no means to Laura's taste. She began to dislike her companion and his tacit assumption that her interests must necessarily be confined to the working of small local charities merely because she had the misfortune to be a clergyman's daughter.

There were times when she regarded her position as a subject for sincere self-congratulation; when the old vicarage seemed but the natural stepping-stone to an episcopal palace and a vaguely glorious future. But to-day she had for the first time a mortifying consciousness that this was not the light in which it struck strangers. She immensely resented having the conversation adapted to what were conceived to be her legitimate interests.

Things were at a standstill. Laura was sighing to acquire some information relative to the brilliant strangers who were staying at the Hall, but she was far too proud to ask any direct questions upon the subject. The conversation languished. Very shortly she was deserted by the stout gentleman, who always afterwards cited her as a notable example of the hopeless stolidity of even the prettiest provincial belles.

"She's very heavy," he remarked confidentially, on rejoining his hostess. "I couldn't stand her for long—no fun at all, you know; I got nothing out of her."

"Really! But you can't expect everything! Being incontestably the best looking girl present, perhaps she thinks it unfair that she should also have to supply all the wits of the party!"

The upshot of this little skirmish was altogether advantageous to our heroine. Actuated by a noble spirit of opposition, Miss Coventry promptly invited her to join a select party that was starting to see the garden, and for the next hour she had the felicity of wandering through interminable greenhouses in the company of a deaf old lady and her daughters.

"But the great thing is to be seen with the right people," as Laura wisely reflected. And one's first conversation with a dowager countess certainly marks an era in one's life.

Miss Coventry was not of the party, having yielded easily to the old lady's representation that she ought to stay with the rest of the guests. Her absence facilitated an obviously pre-arranged scheme

on the part of the visitors, who begged the gardener to give them "just" a root, a sucker, or a cutting of every plant of the least value.

"I am very fond of a garden," explained the old lady; "but I have no notion of giving ridiculous prices for new specimens, like some people! My plan is to collect a bit here and a bit there, as I go about. It's wonderful what it saves in the year, and it is so much more sensible!"

So thought Laura; but she had the wit to perceive that to conduct such a campaign with success one must first be a countess. On the whole, this walk was far the most enjoyable part of the afternoon. Her companions certainly did not exert themselves to entertain her, but on the other hand, they did not attempt to exclude her from their conversation. By the time she had heard the propriety of making some slight pecuniary acknowledgment to the gardener discussed in all its bearings by the three ladies, and the idea finally dismissed as being "quite unnecessary," she felt she had gained a certain insight into the habits of those favoured circles into which it was her one ambition to penetrate. She was not disillusioned by the discovery that an economical countess very much resembles anyone else with a taste for saving. She could even find excellent excuses for little eccentricities on the part of the aristocracy which she would never have advanced on behalf of a poor acquaintance.

As they completed the circuit of the last greenhouse, they were suddenly confronted by Mr. Croft. This time he was quite alone, and had the expectant air of a person who is bent on attaining some definite object. At the mere sight of him Laura felt a revival of all her old doubts and waverings, and she hastily resolved to avoid anything like a private interview. Unfortunately for the success of this plan, she could not very well push past the other ladies, and escape from the greenhouse before them. She was obliged to wait patiently until the last, and then in her confusion she shut her dress into the doorway and had the mortification of seeing the rest of the party walk on with the utmost unconcern, whilst with great deliberation Mr. Croft released her from imprisonment.

"I can hardly expect you to believe me," he began gravely; "but it is nevertheless true, that you slammed the door yourself, and I had nothing to do with it!"

"Did I?" answered Laura, so preoccupied with calculating her chances of escape that she scarcely heard what he was saying. Her only anxiety was to get within earshot of the others with the least possible delay.

"We seem to have shaken off all the old women at last," resumed Mr. Croft, looking furtively round. "I thought we should never get rid of them!"

It can easily be imagined that this remark was eminently fitted to irritate Miss Leslie. The implied unity of purpose, and the reckless

classification of Mrs. Hall and the Countess under the same head-alike affronted her susceptibilities.

"This wretched party has been a regular fraud," he continued, perfectly unconscious of offence. "I did not waste a whole afternoon merely for the pleasure of taking a prolonged stroll with Mrs. Hall!"

"Indeed! What did you expect?" replied Laura, more for the sake of saying something than with any real curiosity to hear his answer. No sooner were the words spoken than she realised her folly in giving him such an opening.

"Now, Miss Leslie," he began, and the very tone of his voice warned her of danger, "that question is really a trifle unimaginative! You must know that I had every reason to expect a very much pleasanter afternoon than I have yet had!"

Laura could not trust herself to speak. If she had only disliked Mr. Croft, it would all have been so beautifully simple. But she felt more strongly every moment that she liked him only too well, and that her sole chance of safety lay in flight. If she listened to him she knew that she should yield at once, even though she might regret it all the rest of her life. At this critical juncture, she was joined by an unexpected auxiliary in the shape of the stout major, who arrived, rather cross and breathless with his hurried pursuit.

"Miss Coventry sent me to look for you," he panted. "She wants to know if you will have some tea. I thought I should never find you," he added testily. "I wonder why ladies always wander to the farthest point from the refreshments?"

"I am going home," announced Mr. Croft, curtly. "I have had quite enough of this. Shall you come?"

"Of course not," said Laura, relaxing into her first smile at the immediate prospect of relief. "I am enjoying myself immensely; but garden-parties are only amusing when one knows everybody."

She enunciated this maxim with much greater boldness than she would have done an hour before; but her recent experiences had been of an inspiring nature. To be the object of a special embassy from her hostess was in itself no slight mark of distinction. Who would have credited Miss Coventry with so much care for the welfare of her guests! The fact that Mr. Croft had turned away with an exclamation of ill-concealed impatience in no wise damped her spirits. She was only glad to be released from the constraint of his presence and left free to pursue her little ambitious schemes without risk of exciting his ridicule.

At last the long afternoon came to an end. The guests dispersed slowly, not knowing when they might again have the chance of inspecting the glories of the Hall. The majority were delighted with their reception, and Sir Gilbert's affability threatened to become a standard topic of conversation in the neighbourhood. Not so much was said about Miss Coventry. It was generally agreed that she was very

proud, and though this was admitted to be a suitable weakness in the daughter of a baronet, still it naturally precluded enthusiasm on the part of social inferiors.

As for Laura, she returned home radiant. Miss Coventry had so far unbent at parting as to murmur a vague hope that they would now see more of each other—words which filled her hearer with the wildest dreams of future bliss. All trifling annoyances were forgotten in the face of the brilliant prospect now opening before her.

No wonder she looked even prettier than usual, as with glowing cheeks she bounded into the old-fashioned drawing-room in search of her father. True, he was not by any means a sympathetic listener, nor was his daughter at all in the habit of confiding in him her hopes and fears; one reason for her reticence being, perhaps, an innate consciousness that in most cases they took diametrically opposite views of a subject. Be that as it may, there are moments when the most self-contained feel more expansive than usual, and it was with a sense of real disappointment that she glanced round the room and found it empty. Not quite empty, though! Someone started up from a dark corner and seized her hand with a low cry of admiration.

"Oh, Laura! Have you come to make me happy at last?" Then she found herself encircled by a strong arm, and drawn close to Mr. Croft's side in a lover-like embrace, which, for the moment, admitted of no resistance.

It is necessary to explain this extraordinary proceeding by stating briefly that the unfortunate man had been awaiting her return for nearly an hour, during which period he had ample time to persuade himself that he was really very much in love with Laura, as well as irretrievably committed to making her an offer. As to her feelings, he had some excuse for imagining that she had betrayed them pretty clearly. He completely misunderstood her flushed cheeks and air of joyous excitement, attributing it wholly to her unfeigned delight at his presence.

"How lovely you are," he exclaimed, stroking her golden hair. "Why didn't you tell me before? Why have we wasted all this time without understanding each other?"

For one long moment Laura yielded to the situation. It seemed so fatally easy to acquiesce in this arrangement, and thus for ever end her difficulties. Then suddenly consciousness returned with a rush and she tore herself away.

"How dare you speak to me like that?" she stammered out at last. Her sole chance of not breaking down hopelessly was to affect an amount of indignation which she was very far from feeling. "I never gave you the right to do anything of the kind!"

"No, I know you have not. I am very sorry," returned Mr. Croft humbly. Probably he had been too precipitate and had alarmed the

sensitive girl. "I always was such a fool about this kind of thing!" he reflected. At the same time he could not help noticing that Laura looked much more attractive than usual in her excitement. He did not attach the slightest importance to her vehement protestations, concluding that they were only the result of shyness, which would easily yield to a little judicious coaxing.

"I am sorry you were startled," he began again in rather a subdued tone. "I thought you understood me yesterday, and had recognised my numerous efforts to speak to you this afternoon. In fact I was vain enough for a moment to fancy that you were looking forward to this meeting as much as I was."

No responsive smile appeared on Laura's face. The soft dimples had stiffened into hard, resolute lines. The white brow was puckered with intensity of thought. She was making up her mind to resist all weakness, however much the resolution might cost her.

She was for the first time called on to act up to her principles, and an unexpected obstacle had arisen in the shape of a traitor in the camp. For a few seconds it was a hard struggle between brain and heart; but as might have been anticipated from Laura's antecedents, the brain came off completely victorious.

"I cannot imagine what you are alluding to, Mr. Croft," she began with metallic politeness. "You seem to be labouring under some extraordinary delusion respecting our relative positions. But I am willing to accept your apology on the understanding that you never revert to the subject. Good-bye."

"Nonsense! You must wait and hear me out." And Mr. Croft slammed the door with rather more violence than was absolutely necessary. "To the best of my abilities I made you an offer yesterday, and I was under the impression that you had practically accepted me. You must forgive me if I acted on this assumption. But, oh, Laura!" he continued with a sudden collapse of formality, "didn't you ever mean it?"

"No, never. Don't you see there are insuperable difficulties in your position—and the farm—and everything," concluded Laura rather limply. Her chief desire was to bring the interview to an end without a direct explanation. But this was not to be.

"Oh, you don't like the farm? Well, I don't blame you for that. I am getting rather tired of it myself, and I shall not be at all averse to moving on if I can take you with me! So the insuperable objections have already vanished into thin air!"

"What hopeless denseness men invariably display if one attempts to hint at anything disagreeable!" thought Laura. "It is a simple waste of time trying to spare their feelings."

"You misunderstand me," she said. "You have been very kind to my father, which I shall never forget. As for myself, every position has its obligations, and I am sure that I should find no happiness in forgetting them!"

"I am afraid you must think me very slow, but candidly I am completely mystified! Your position, you say, will not permit you to marry?"

"Out of my class!" rejoined Laura impatiently. "Imagine what my friends—what Miss Coventry, for instance—would think if I married someone they could not recognise! Oh, I might be fond of you, but I could never survive such a disgrace!"

This statement had at least the merit of extreme lucidity. It penetrated even Mr. Croft's dense armour of unconscious complacency. For the first time he saw the situation from Laura's point of view. He remained silent for awhile, busily engaged in re-adjusting his impressions of the female sex. Laura stood, red and miserable, in the middle of the room, feverishly twisting her handkerchief in her trembling fingers. She had never contemplated speaking with such brutal directness. The truth had slipped out unawares. But she would not withdraw a word. Besides, it was now too late. Mr. Croft was taking leave of her. A few conventional parting phrases, and he was gone; his presence already nothing but a memory.

"I certainly put him in his place that time," muttered Laura. But the would-be triumphant words died away upon her lips, and it was with a very sad face that she presently crept up to her room. There was little fear, after this last rebuff, that Mr. Croft would again venture to take any liberties. In spite of this exhilarating reflection, she felt unaccountably depressed. Even the indisputable beauty of the new hat failed to extract a smile. Still it was characteristic of the girl, that notwithstanding a good deal of genuine emotion, she mechanically performed all her usual observances with regard to new clothes; making them the subject of much minute study in the looking-glass before carefully packing them away in their respective boxes for the night.

Things looked much brighter next morning. Laura was quite herself again, and comfortably convinced that she had acted all along with her invariable good common-sense. She was a little ashamed of her past weakness, and blushed as she recalled her narrow escape of committing a sentimental folly. In future she would be careful to avoid such pitfalls, and interest herself solely in the steady pursuit of social advancement. As a preliminary step she must at once cement her friendship with Miss Coventry. Theoretically, it seemed such a natural arrangement that two lonely, motherless girls, living within half a mile of each other, should be inseparable companions. Practically, they had hitherto seen little more of each other than if they resided on different continents. Still there seemed a promise of better things in Miss Coventry's parting speech. Perhaps this crisis was destined to be the turning-point of her career.

Laura hugged this idea during the succeeding weeks. Morning after morning she rose full of hope. Surely Miss Coventry would call or possibly invite her to spend the day by way of inaugurating

their new intimacy. Of course she did not neglect the obvious step of calling at the Hall shortly after the party. She was rewarded by the information that Miss Coventry was out—a statement which was evidently veracious, as she was distinctly visible upon the tennis-lawn, surrounded by a laughing group of friends. Laura tried to console herself with the reflection that she had probably not been recognised at that distance. But, look at it which way she would, it was a disheartening incident and seemed to accentuate the gulf between Vicarage and Hall.

Judge, then, of Miss Leslie's excitement, when one afternoon, whilst sauntering listlessly back from an objectless stroll, she encountered a smart groom, in the well-known green livery, trotting jauntily down the moss-grown drive! Apparently the long-expected message had come at last. She would have run all the way up to the house but for a certain habitual self-consciousness, which led her to believe that the servant might suspect and ridicule her anxiety. After all, there was no need to hurry. Five minutes more and Laura was in the hall, contemplating with a blank countenance a card which lay upon the table. At first she almost doubted the evidence of her senses. A further examination proved that her apprehensions were only too well founded. There lay the card, clearly bearing the magic letters, P. P. C.!

For a moment Laura stood paralysed by this unexpected blow. Then she adopted the unprecedented course of going straight to her father's study. She found the old gentleman absorbed in the perusal of catalogues.

In the seclusion of his apartment, he relapsed frequently into the rusty black coat and easy carpet slippers which were now rigorously banished from the drawing-room.

He started guiltily at the entrance of his daughter, shuffling his feet under the table, in a vain hope of concealing some of the more obnoxious articles of his attire. Laura had hard work to speak respectfully as she took in the details of this homely scene. If carpet slippers could be annihilated by scornful glances, Mr. Leslie's old favourites would long since have ceased to exist.

"Look at this, papa!" And the important card went flying across the table amongst a forest of dusty papers and books.

"Well?"

Laura was maddened by the mildly interrogative tone and look.

"Well," she echoed, harshly. "Did you know that they were going away?"

"You mean the Coventrys?"

An impatient gesture was the only reply.

"Sir Gilbert gave me to understand as much last Board Day. He mentioned that his daughter's health caused him some anxiety, and he talked of spending the winter abroad to avoid the damp——"

"The Hall is not damp, and Miss Coventry is as strong as I am,"

interrupted Laura, dogmatically. "And why did you say nothing about it?"

"You never asked me, my dear."

Argument with this impracticable old gentleman was a sheer waste of time. Laura left the room, choking ostentatiously at the smoke curling up from her father's pipe. It was probably mere scandal that attributed the Vicar's daily increasing fondness for tobacco to the fact that his daughter had an unconquerable aversion to the smell. But perhaps we shall be justified in assuming that he did not altogether regret the circumstance which deprived him of her company during a considerable portion of the day.

So ended Laura's sanguine dream. It would be difficult to describe what a blank the absence of the Coventrys created in her life. It was certainly not owing to the frequency of their meetings. But lately her imagination had been exclusively engrossed with various brilliant plans, all turning on her projected intimacy with the Hall party. These were now necessarily at an end. Her social efforts were evidently not destined to be successful, and she had no home interests to fall back upon. Life for the future threatened to be an interminable succession of monotonous duties grudgingly performed.

To crown her vexations came the news that Mr. Croft had left the neighbourhood for an indefinite time, probably for months, as he had installed the bailiff in the farm-house. True, she had rejected him in most insulting terms, and still daily repeated that she did not regret having done so. Nevertheless she felt that the bare chance of an occasional meeting during the deadly dulness of the long winter would be a pleasing excitement. Of course she would never again run the risk of encouraging him too much. Still, at times she positively yearned for any variety on her present existence.

Laura meditated profoundly over the past during her long walks about the frost-bound lanes (for though she loathed country walks, she was far too sensible to stay indoors, realising fully how much health and a good complexion depend upon regular exercise). She was consistently positive that she had acted with the utmost discretion in remaining true to her ideal match. But where was the reward of virtue? When would the fairy prince appear upon the scene?

As time wore on her position became more and more intolerable. She had never made any secret of her contempt for such society as the village afforded. Still it was with a certain shock that she found herself excluded from all the little friendly Christmas gatherings. At least she would have liked her absence to be optional! But some acute local intellect had penetrated Miss Leslie's design of holding herself aloof, and it was unanimously decided not to give her the chance of refusing invitations.

So the weeks dragged on. The intolerable monotony of a long frost was only relieved by an occasional half-hearted thaw. About

once a week the barometer promised a change of weather, which, after much indecision, usually took the form of a heavy fall of snow. Then as a rule the temperature rose for a few hours and the surface of the earth was reduced to slush. After which it invariably froze again harder than ever.

But towards the end of February the change came. The air felt soft and caressing. Unsuspected patches of snowdrops cropped up in all the odd corners. The worms emerged from their enforced retirement, and were welcomed without a moment's delay by the ever watchful blackbirds.

Though Miss Leslie cared very little about flowers or birds, and absolutely ignored the existence of worms, she was infected by the general atmosphere of hopefulness. Surely the spring must bring some change into her life also. Unconsciously she lived in a state of perpetual expectation. It seemed quite natural that her father should enter the room one evening a little more briskly than usual, announcing, as he took his seat at the end of the table, that he had just heard some news.

"You sometimes complain that I live too exclusively in my books, my dear; but I have been beforehand with you this time."

"What is this wonderful event? Is your new school-mistress going to leave, or ——"

"Nothing of the sort," interrupted the old gentleman, chuckling softly at the excellent joke he had in store for his daughter. "Guess again! I will give you a clue; it concerns Miss Coventry."

"She is going to be married."

"Dear me! Ladies seem to divine these things by intuition," observed Mr. Leslie, helping himself pensively to a cutlet. "Very extraordinary! Now no *man* would have thought of that."

"A good match, of course?"

The Vicar assented with a cheerful nod. "Very good, I should say."

A long pause followed this statement, during which Laura envied Miss Coventry from the bottom of her heart.

"Well, my dear, what do you think of my news?" said her father at last. He seemed strangely elated at being in the unusual position of communicating a piece of gossip.

"I think some people have all the luck," replied Laura, wearily. "Did you hear the man's name?"

"Ah, capital! Now we have come to it at last. You must positively guess the name ——"

"But I know so few of the Coventrys' friends," interrupted Laura, impatiently. "It is not that fat old major who was at the garden party? He looked at her a good deal, I noticed."

"No! no!" broke out the Vicar, unable any longer to contain his excitement. "What do you say to our friend Croft being the happy man?"

For one moment Laura suspected that her excellent parent had broken through the traditions of a lifetime, and made a joke. A glance reassured her upon this point. He was evidently stating a sober fact.

"But you said it was a good match!" was all she could gasp.

"So people seem to think it, now that he has come into his cousin's property. The cousin was a bachelor, and died at Rome of fever, and Croft comes into ten thousand a-year. For my part, I always considered him a very companionable young man," concluded the Vicar, testily. His piece of news had failed to elicit the exclamations of delight he had anticipated.

"Has she known him long?" inquired Laura, faintly.

"Some time, I believe. I hardly like to repeat such gossip, but they say that Miss Coventry only came down to the Hall for the summer because she heard that Mr. Croft was in the neighbourhood; but —"

"And have you known all along that he was an acquaintance of the Coventrys?" interrupted Miss Leslie, sternly.

"Yes, I suppose so, my dear. At least I don't think he ever made any secret of it, though he did not seem very interested in them at that time, as far as I noticed."

"Oh, why did you never tell me?" she muttered, in a tone of condensed rage.

"My dear, I do not remember that you ever asked me the question," answered her father, simply.

Laura sat quite still, her face growing harder and paler every moment. She felt too sick for further argument or recrimination. Her past seemed illuminated by a lightning-flash.

"I loved him all along," she thought, with despair. "I know it now that it is too late; I sacrificed everything to my miserable ambition, and now I am to be punished for it all the rest of my life."

For Laura had no illusions on the subject. She felt with all the force of conviction that as far as she was concerned the fairy prince had come and gone, and in spite of all her careful scheming, she knew that she had missed her only chance!



THE FIFTH OF MAY.

Manzoni's Ode to Napoleon.

He was : as silent as the clay,
 Its mortal anguish o'er,
 From whence the spirit passed away
 To the eternal shore—
 So still stood worlds, aghast to hear
 The tidings of death's messenger :
 Mute—pondering on that final hour—
 Doubting if e'er again
 Earth should behold so grand a power,
 So great a king of men ;
 Or tread of lordlier footstep e'er
 Trample the dust that crumbles there.

To him on his imperial throne
 I turned no flatterer's face,
 The goal might be or lost or won
 In life's uncertain race ;
 With myriad sounding tongues my voice
 Disdained to wail or to rejoice :
 Unmoved to servile note of praise,
 From coward censure far,
 My lyre now thrills to mournful lays
 At fall of such a star ;
 And a funereal melody
 Awakes, that haply will not die.

From farthest Alp to Pyramid,
 From Spain to Rhenish strand,
 War's thunderbolts and lightnings slid
 From his uplifted hand ;
 Pursuing swiftly in his train,
 From realm to realm, from main to main.
 Was this true glory ? Let the days
 To come pass sentence : we
 Can but bow down before His ways,
 To His supreme decree,
 Who willed such sign in wondrous hour
 Of his Creative Spirit's power.

The fitful joy, the lofty scheme,
 Fame's fleeting, maddening breath,
 Ambitious, wild, tumultuous dream,
 The crown, the victor's wreath :
 Such prize attained, none might foresee,
 In fondest flight of fantasy !
 All this was his ! the kingly sway,
 The pride of perils past,
 The closing of the shadowed day,
 The exile's grave at last !
 Twice in the dust—disown'd—denied—
 Twice chosen—worshipp'd—deified !

His voice was heard, uprais'd between
 Two arm'd centuries;
 The doom of warring worlds was seen
 In his controlling eyes.
 They bent, as if to fate, to hear
 The fiat of their arbiter.
 As sudden meteors fall—he fell!
 Lay caged in prison bound;
 The mark of hate inexorable—
 Pity—immense—profound.
 Of loyalty no chance could move,
 Belief profound, undaunted love.

As on the drowning wretch's head
 There falls the rolling wave,
 Pressing him down to icy bed,
 Where there is none to save;
 But still his wild despairing eyes
 Appeal for aid to seas and skies—
 So on that weary, struggling soul
 Pale phantoms crowded fast,
 Whilst memory would fain unrol
 The record of the past.
 But from the page, resistless tears
 Would blot the tale of bygone years.

Alas! how oft at eventide,
 Deserted, mock'd, oppress'd,
 He stood, eyes bent on ocean wide,
 Arms folded on his breast,
 Whilst memory to his backward gaze,
 Recalled the scenes of bygone days.
 Once more, beholding tented plain
 And glittering ranks pass by;
 Hearing the clash of arms again,
 The shout of victory;
 Once more, a voice in stern command,
 And swift response of heart and hand.

Break, tortur'd heart! the pitying hand
 That strikes and that consoles,
 Thy name in the immortal land,
 Amongst His hosts enrolls;
 Where earthly glory fades away
 Before the light of endless day.
 God's pity bids the voices cease,
 Uprais'd in blame and wrath;
 Strong in repentance, pardon, peace,
 He lies serene in death.
 Sleeping—the cross above his breast,
 Upon his desert couch of rest.

C. E. MEETKERKE.

FAIR NORMANDY.

BY CHARLES W. WOOD, F.R.G.S., AUTHOR OF "THROUGH HOLLAND,"
"LETTERS FROM MAJORCA," ETC. ETC.



CAEN.

OUR regret at leaving Chartres was only one of several evils that arise from having a limited time at your command in going through any country. Many things have to be left undone; many spots must remain unexplored. The "accidents of travel" must be passed over; by which we mean, breaking our journey at places that never entered into our plans and calculation; places that we pass on the road and perhaps never heard of, but that look wonderfully inviting. It is a true sorrow to have to go on and leave we know not what of the beautiful, the rare and the unknown behind us.

Again it is possible to have to leave a place before you have grown familiar with it. Its influence is not yet upon you; has not sunk into the mind as a photograph, to remain your own for ever. You have not had time to study certain types of human nature that have strangely interested you; for this is a usual experience in travelling to everyone who does not keep himself unsocially exclusive. Of course it necessitates familiarity with the language of the country; without which, no matter where you are, you will feel very much as a mariner at sea without a compass.

And, abroad, the study of human nature is made easy by the temperament of the people. They meet you much more than half way; open their hearts and minds to you; give you their confidences—and do not in the least expect yours in return, which is a great thing. It is their rule to talk, and it does not in the least matter that they never saw you before and may never see you again.

This is no doubt the better way of going through the world. It is making the most of life, which comes to no one a second time. It is not garrulity only which makes old age more talkative than youth, but experience. Only in England does this mantle of reservation fall upon one; this imposed silence. It is partly due to

the fact that the English are not conversational. They cannot "make talk," without an effort which, only too apparent, soon defeats itself. The thorough Englishman is grave and silent. But when a mixture of Celtic blood has been infused into his veins the strings of his tongue are loosened, his imagination becomes more lively, and he grows accessible.

On leaving Chartres, we felt that we should like to know more both of place and people. We had again met the professors who had so puzzled us that first evening, and found them extremely agreeable men; almost too full of fun and liveliness for those who have to minister to youth. It is, however, only great minds that can unbend. To them, indeed, it is a necessity; and of them most emphatically it may be said, under certain conditions, "Once a child always a child." If mankind only realised it, this capacity for feeling yourself in touch with childhood and youth is a sure way of keeping your own heart green, your sympathies in order. When a man allows himself to grow old in thought and feeling, his work is done; life is over; there is nothing left but to calmly await the summons to the Everlasting Regions, where alone his youth can be restored.

As we steamed away from Chartres, it looked more picturesque than ever. It was such a strange mixture of youth and age; the lively and the sublime; the unbending and the severe. The river wound its course round the town and through the vast plains. Its banks under the very shadow of the cathedral were as perfect as anything we had seen. It was crossed by ancient bridges; forges and small factories and antiquated houses found their reflections upon the water; as did the graceful and overhanging trees—the weeping willow and drooping birch and others, now changing to the tints of autumn; as did the wonderfully picturesque women kneeling in long rows before their washing-boards in white caps and Normandy handkerchiefs crossed over their shoulders; not so graceful as the trees, it must be admitted, but much more lively and interesting. But the trees, alas, have an advantage over them. It was autumn, and would soon be winter; and by-and-by, spring would come again and they would renew their youth. These fair women, youth once passed, would have no second spring. During our stay they had looked up at us with flashing eyes, as we pointed the camera at them, and their laughter would ripple out, and carry itself far down the stream, and here and there—rare occurrence—a pearly set of teeth would be disclosed. For as a rule these people, men and women, lose their teeth almost in their first youth.

All this was over. The beautiful hill rose upwards, crowned by those matchless spires, for which the blue sky overhead seemed a fitting canopy. Sunshine sparkled over all; the world was fair and beautiful; life an ecstasy. It always must be so at these moments, when under the influence of all that is brightest and best in creation. It is then that we most realise how glorious life is; most feel that

nothing but these "earthly chains" keep the soul from that "dread apocalypse" which must one day send it on its long unknown journey.

We were on our road to Caen, and if anything could reconcile us



OLD GATEWAY, CHARTRES.

to a premature departure from Chartres, it was this. For no town in Normandy possesses greater attractions, and to some it is more interesting even than Rouen itself.

Our way lay in and about very pretty and picturesque country. We passed through rugged cuttings, through wide and fertile plains,

where rivers ran their winding course. There were fruit-laden orchards without number; trees bending under the weight of apples that would soon be transferred to the crushing stone and turned into cider; which, as a Scotchman remarked to us at dinner a few evenings later on, was "very poor stuff for the constitution." No doubt it was especially so to him, who, judging by his complexion, was accustomed to stronger waters than those distilled in the cider mills of Normandy.

The orchards looked very lovely, the apples very tempting, as we passed through them that sunny day. They were all about our path, on the right hand and on the left. Farms and farm buildings nestled in the midst of this peace and plenty. A calm and happy existence it must be for these people, who have no consciousness of the possibilities of a life beyond; the sweets and the snares of the greater world, with its phantoms and delusions. They know nothing of the fever of life. It is a sort of Eden existence; and if the serpent has entered in, he has less power to tempt; his poison is less subtle.

Very calm it looked, this sunny day, when there was just that suspicion of melancholy over all that the first days of autumn inevitably bring with them.

Here and there hill-sides rose beyond the valleys covered with a wealth of changing verdure. The country was made more beautiful, very English in aspect, by the intersecting hedges, so rarely seen in France out of Normandy. But in England we have not this long succession of orchards, which give Normandy its type; just as the hop-gardens do to certain parts of England, the lovely and luscious vineyards to the Sunny South.

So the hours passed in travelling were not the least agreeable of our experiences in Fair Normandy.

H. C.'s nine-and-twenty packages had not increased on this occasion; but it was no fault of his. Chartres is behind the world in these matters. There were two ancient shops near the cathedral, but they contained such a collection of rubbish that a moment's inspection in each was sufficient. He left Chartres mentally braced, as everyone must be who gazes upon the wonders of the cathedral. Even the superstitious atmosphere of the Black Virgin and the substantial charms of our worthy female guide went for something. But in actual possessions he was none the richer. He had not added to his griffins, his gurgoyles, his pottery and porcelain—for nothing comes amiss to his mania for collection if it is only sufficiently old and ugly; and his *recherché* London flat, and his little country shooting box, are simply small South Kensington Museums, which might be cited as specimens in a work on "Mediaeval and other Antiquities."

When we reached Caen the shades of night were falling. It was rather a long drive from the railway station to the heart of the town, and we freighted one of the omnibuses, which rattled off in the usual

style. H. C.'s nine-and-twenty packages began a tournament with each other, and it took him all his time to keep them out of danger and prevent disastrous collisions.

On a previous visit we had "descended" at the Hôtel d'Angleterre, supposed to be the best in Caen; but the rooms had been so close, the cleanliness so questionable, that on this occasion we chose the Hôtel de la Place Royale. At least it stood in the large open square, where one felt it possible to breathe. We had not breathed on the former occasion, but had almost died of suffocation.

The present inn was worth a visit, if only out of curiosity. We were given a double room looking on to the square: an outer and an inner room, for which we drew lots. The inner room fell to H. C., and it was so dark at midday that candles had to be lighted before he could contemplate the ravages made by chocolate upon his complexion. In Majorca he had been the victim of mosquitos and anisette; the anisette supplied by the old man of the sea in his boat, on the occasion of our visit to the caves of Manacor—as the reader may remember if he chanced to accompany us to that rare and radiant little island. Here, in Normandy, he was the victim of chocolate and absinthe; for which destructive beverage he developed a greater liking the deeper we penetrated into the country. Separately, each is sufficiently unwholesome; together, they are fatal.

But to go back to the hotel—for the pen is like a geographical index, and in a moment you may pass from Madagascar to Malaga—from Majorca to Caen.

We reached our room peculiarly and under difficulties.

A small, winding wooden staircase led up to the first floor—in fact ended there. The staircase was open to the small courtyard and a few ferns and plants that grew about. It was not unpicturesque. You might stand at the top of the staircase, and looking down contemplate monsieur in his bureau, his bald but shapely head superintending the weighty matters of his *caisse*. Every now and then madame would appear on the scene, no doubt with some command for her lord and master—or in other words, her most obedient slave. We will not describe her charms; the pen has its limits, and we must draw the line; the reader shall imagine them.

Here, also, we took no liberties. We neither intruded into the kitchen nor sought the chef. The delightful primitiveness of Evreux and Chartres—so refreshing to one's spirit after the magnificence of "Grand Hôtels" and "Hôtels Splendides"—had not followed us to Caen. Here we had to return to the ordinary ways of the world. The kitchen and the chef no doubt existed, but we had to imagine them—as the reader by this time has imagined the charms of madame.

At the top of the little winding staircase you passed down a narrow passage, open to the sky on one side. Immediately underneath, forming part and parcel of the house, were the stables. They were

too close to be pleasant, and we thought it the most singular arrangement we had ever seen or heard of. In Ireland the pig forms an honoured part of the household—and very properly, as he is supposed to pay the rent; but we had never yet come across an hotel in Normandy in which the horses were placed on the same footing as the Irish pig. However, beyond a slight inconvenience in passing and repassing to our room, the Normandy horse proved in no sense of the word disagreeable. I doubt if we could say as much for the Irish household.

The landlord of the hotel was very civil and obliging, but he could not give us very much of his time. He had too much to do, and was a busier if not a greater personage than our hosts of Evreux and Chartres. He might be seen in ten different places at once—we do not pretend to explain the miracle: it is enough to record it—guiding, directing, ordering; sometimes scolding—though never madame. The table-d'hôte was inferior to that of the Hôtel d'Angleterre, but there must always be some reservation wherever you go: and we prefer fresh air to the pleasures of the table, which after all are insidious.

The company was much more numerous at the Hôtel Royale, but on the other hand not so "select." At the Hôtel d'Angleterre it had been very exclusive: an old and very famous Abbé, and a great Personage of the town; the present writer and a certain H. of the Salamander species: the two latter winding and wending their way home from the Channel Islands. The Abbé, we remember, thoroughly enjoyed his dinner whilst reciting to his friend clever and comforting rhymes prophesying the approaching destruction of the world. These, however, in no way disturbed his appetite, nor took from the flavour of some excellent chartreuse that with coffee and cigarettes brought the repast to a very fine conclusion.

At the Place Royale the company was numerous and less select, but quite respectable. The waiters were discriminating too, and placed those who looked quietly inclined at the further end of the table, which formed three fourths of a square.

We were the only Englishmen present, with the exception of an artist who had been for some weeks at the inn, taking sketches in the neighbourhood, and was no doubt by this time looked upon as an old inhabitant. He sat in the very centre of the noisier group, evidently commercial travellers; looking, we thought, supremely uncomfortable. But perhaps we only gauged his feelings by what ours would have been under the circumstances. There were several military officers at table, by which we judged that the hotel was popular in the town.

But we have to do with the exterior of Caen rather than with any interior; and what charms we find there! It is different from Rouen in that it leaves more distinct pictures and impressions upon the mind. As a whole, the town may be less interesting, though we

doubt it, but there are a greater number of separate points on which to concentrate the attention. The interest of Rouen is more diffused, and takes longer time to be known. Caen is also, naturally, a less bustling town; there is more quietness and repose about it. It has a more ecclesiastical or monastical aspect; gives you more the feeling of a cathedral city—though it does not possess one—and is endowed with a more mediæval flavour.

The whole time we were in Caen we were overshadowed by this delightful and inspiring influence. The atmosphere of its past history clings to it with strange force. It seems to bring vividly before you all the grand old days and times of William the Conqueror, and is a strong link binding the place intimately with English interests and associations.

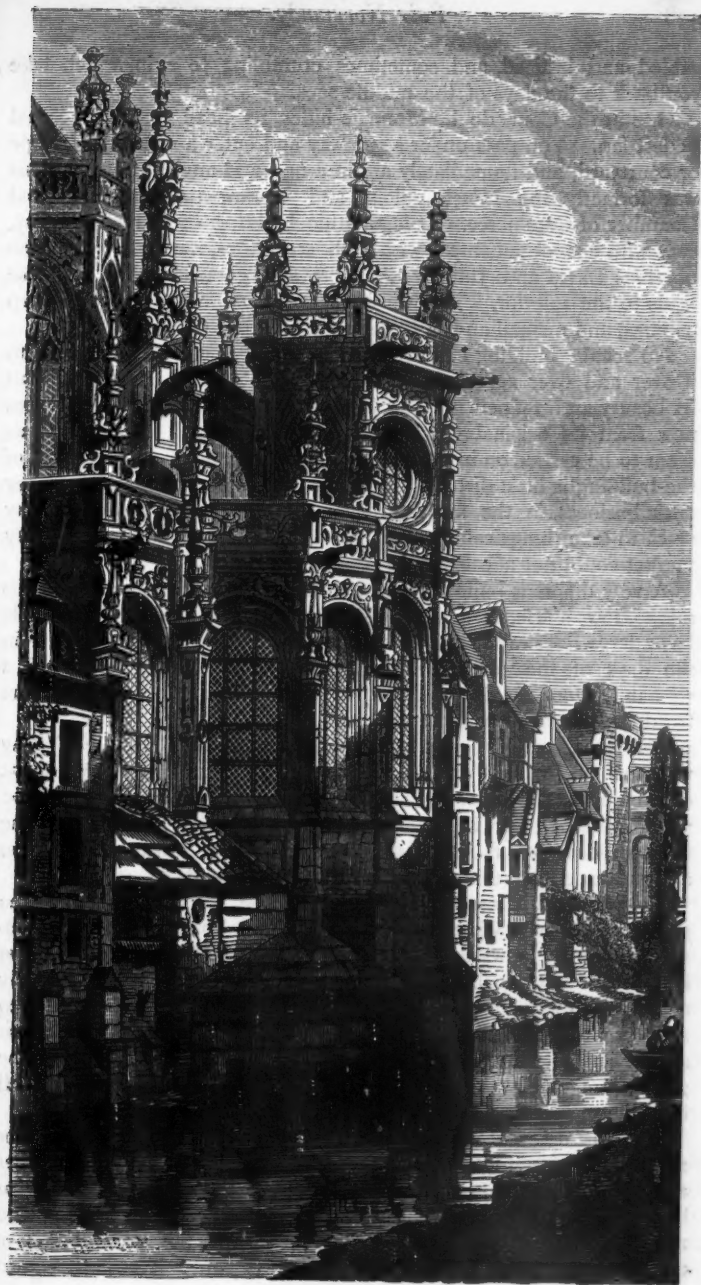
This interest is two-fold—historical and ecclesiastical; and the two are so bound together that you cannot separate the one from the other, or tell which is the greater.

The historical record comprises much that is most important in history: dating from the time when our country entered upon a new era, a new secular dispensation. If our eyes have wept tears at the death of Harold the Fair, last of the Saxon Kings, our hearts have also thrilled at the fine nature and brave deeds of William the Norman. The whole record is full of romance. For the ruggedness of the times has smoothed with the lapse of ages, and over all those days and events we throw something of the refinement of this nineteenth century.

In Caen, standing before his tomb, you seem to be brought face to face with him and the whole history of that time. All its battles and changes, its downfalls and uprisings, seem to pass before you in a succession of vivid mental pictures.

Caen has had a long and successful career, though it is shorn of some of its ancient greatness. It was formerly the capital of Lower Normandy, and is situated in the charming and fertile plains that constitute the principal wealth of the Department of Calvados. It owes much of its prosperity to the two rivers, the Orne and the Odon. It is only ten miles away from the sea, and at high water vessels of considerable tonnage can come up to its port, which is formed by the confluence of these rivers. The stream flows onwards through the town, and its banks, lined with fine trees, form a charming and popular promenade on a summer's evening. The declining sun lights up the water and glints through the whispering branches, and you may fall into contemplation and dream of the events of the last eight hundred years with which Caen is connected; muse over the loves of William and Matilda, their offence against the Church, and the glorious monuments that have come down to us to-day as peace offerings to his Holiness Pope Nicholas II.

We have said that Caen is full of this past atmosphere. As you walk its streets you are constantly coming upon ancient houses,



EAST END OF ST. PETER'S.

gabled and latticed, and sometimes crumbling to ruin, which take you back to the days of the middle ages.

One in the *Cour de la Monnaie* hides its head from the casual pedestrian. You pass under a gateway and enter a small quadrangle or courtyard, and immediately are in a new and ancient world. This was formerly the *Hôtel Valois*, and is now the Exchange and Chamber of Commerce. It is a gothic building of extreme beauty, grey with age, ornamented with rich sculptures, amongst which one observes David and Judith. A short and graceful stone staircase leads to the interior. The windows are mullioned and have deep copings, and a small and beautiful turret rises in one of the angles.

No secular building in Caen is more interesting, and you return to it over and over again, charmed with its old-world atmosphere, all its beauty and refinement. It is given over to very different uses now from its original destiny, but the commercial affairs of Caen seem to be carried on in a quiet and leisurely manner, and the spirit of the building is little disturbed by those who go to and fro and occupy their business in the feverish ocean of stocks and shares. They seem to take things calmly, as if the daily fluctuations of the Money market could not affect them.

A very different building, and producing very different emotions, is a long, low house, in a quiet side street, gabled and timbered. It has a large doorway in the centre, and from this doorway issued in the days of the great revolution the small deformed figure of a woman. One sees a fixed resolve in her expression, and her feet tread the pavement with no uncertain sound.

Somehow, one always associates the image of Charlotte Corday with that of Joan of Arc. The one perhaps was moved by a spirit of fanaticism, the other by righteous anger and despair. The one was devoted to her king, the other to her country; but the same spirit of devotion moved both, the same desire to save and rescue and put an end to the destruction that was abroad.

Both women accomplished their purpose. Which required the greater courage? Charlotte Corday, without doubt. Joan was constantly spurred onwards by the fire of enthusiasm, the nobleness of her aim, the chivalry that surrounded her. She more publicly appealed to heaven, and the confidence which so often leads to success was hers. She was upheld by the excitement of movement and action, the fever of martial glory. The clashing of armour, the glancing of steel, the tread of horses, the worship of a multitude, all helped to strengthen her resolve, her belief in a divine mission.

But how different with Charlotte Corday. In the quietness of her room, probably in the dark hours of the night, she formed her resolution. Day after day the crying of the dying ascending to heaven grew louder in her ears, struck deeper to her heart. The red stream flowing from the terrible guillotine, the warm blood of the victims, seemed to coil itself about her, until it rose to a great

sea, which might engulf all France, and in which she herself seemed to be sinking.

The figure of Monsieur de Paris, as he stood out upon the terrible platform above the sea of surrounding and upturned faces in which horror seemed giving place to a dull apathy, haunted her night and day. She saw him directing the dreaded instrument; saw the glancing blade descending upon the neck of the unhappy Queen of France, the beautiful head roll into the sawdust and the once graceful and dignified body removed only to give place to another victim. She heard the rattling of the tumbrel through the streets of Paris, loaded with its despairing but still living freight. As it reached the place of execution, she saw a poor young mother, torn from her hearth—whose only crime was love for her husband and fidelity to a fallen house—throw her infant into the crowd to pitying arms outstretched to receive it, and then turn to the executioner and bid him do his work well and quickly, and end her misery. She saw those frightful men, fiends incarnate, who, like the beasts of the forest—all their savagery without their nobleness—seemed only to thirst for more blood, the more it flowed. Danton, Marat, and Robespierre: a trio and a combination of wickedness the world has seldom witnessed. She saw them as demons, and pictured them with cloven hoof and relentless expression. The cry that went up from so many hearts appealing to heaven for vengeance seemed to reach her; and she resolved that one of these fiends at least should die by her own hand.

It was a brave resolve, but she counted the cost. She knew that failure might possibly be the result; but be that as it might, that death to herself was almost a certainty.

And in the chill dawn of an early morning a small, solitary figure might have been seen issuing from that old doorway in Caen, the fire of a firm resolve, the light of hope, in her eyes. She started on her pilgrimage to Paris.

As she left the town behind her, its early smoke must have risen like incense towards heaven, and she, too, perhaps felt that her mission was holy. But no clashing of arms, no glitter of armour, no nodding of plumes and prancing of steeds, no shouting of soldiery, uplifted as one voice, strengthened her courage and seemed to pronounce a benediction upon her work, as in the case of Joan of Arc. The Maid of Orleans and the Maid of Caen were alike only in that the mission of each was one of mercy.

Sad and solitary and subdued, but undaunted, went the brave spirit of Charlotte Corday on her way towards the ill-fated capital. The laughing fields, the rich plains of Calvados, the blue heavens above—let us hope that these seemed to smile upon her, not to mock her by their celestial radiancy and calm. She had need of all her courage, of strength above that of woman.

She had left the smoke of Caen behind her, and we wonder with

what feelings she approached her journey's end, and saw the smoke of Paris in like manner ascending. Did it speak to her of incense? Was it red with the blood of un-numbered victims? Did it strengthen her resolve to accomplish her purpose or die in the attempt? It must have done so; or that frail woman would have faltered and failed in her purpose at the supreme moment. For we may make high resolves and have desperate courage on the eve of action; but it is only when face to face with the enemy, the roar of cannon in our ears and the flash of fire before our eyes, that we know how far we shall prove worthy or be found wanting.

We know the result. How her courage failed not, and success attended her; that weak woman's hand struck down the tyrant, and helped—we shall never know how much—to bring the Reign of Terror to a close. She buckled on no sword for the occasion and put on no armour; no artificial aid nerved her hand and sustained her courage.

So Rouen has its Joan of Arc and Caen its Charlotte Corday.

But Caen does not seem proud of the distinction. There is no statue to her memory, as far as I know, nor any street named after her. She lives only in her deed. But to us, as we gazed upon those windows whence she must often have looked upon the outer world, her spirit seemed to haunt the spot, her pale and remarkable face to peer out upon us from every pane.

It was a very quiet, deserted street; and this old house stood out amidst its more modern neighbours just as Charlotte herself must have stood out conspicuously above her contemporaries. True, the deed was assassination: murder, if you will: but was it not justified by the motive, atoned for by the result, if atonement were needed? What is war but assassination, where men for less cause single out each other for death; and the brave and the noble fall; and the fair locks that lately waved in the breeze lie low on the battle-field; and the frank voice, lately so full of light and laughter, is silenced for ever?

To us the spirit of Charlotte Corday haunts Caen quite as much as Joan of Arc haunts Rouen. But there is less of chivalry and romance about her, and she is less thought of by the world. She would not make the subject of a grand epic poem. Her deed was less stirring, her end less tragic. She has not been canonised by the church, or immortalised in song. But she was a great woman; and perhaps when the glamour of five centuries enfolds her name and deed, she too will be accorded by the Pope, and by universal consent, a place in the calendar of the saints.

But Caen has other influences: they are as diversified as they are numerous. Beyond and above all are her grand ecclesiastical monuments. In these she yields to none, and for our own part, when we gaze upon the Abbaye aux Hommes and the Abbaye aux Dames, we almost feel as if we had never before gazed upon the true splendour and perfection of architecture.

We spoke just now of the beauty and refinement of the Hôtel Valois. Turning from it, and passing through the gateway, you see before you the famous Church of St. Pierre. It is a gothic building, of various dates. The nave was constructed in the fourteenth and



OLD HOUSES, CAEN.

fifteenth centuries, and the choir probably at a not much later period, though it is more richly ornamented. The chapels behind the choir are still more elaborate, and the roofs are groined in the form of pendant fringes. The singular effect is heightened by the coloured windows, which subdue the light, and for modern windows are sufficiently good. The side walls are pierced with arches, filled in with

statues. These chapels are of the Renaissance period, the time of Francis I.

In the nave, the capitals of the columns are curious, representing subjects taken from history and mythology. These again were formed at a time when instruction was gained very much by the eye. On one column, for instance, Aristotle is seen walking on all fours and carrying upon his back the mistress of Alexander, who exacted as a penance that the philosopher should in this way conduct her to the palace. History records not how he had fallen under the lady's displeasure, but possibly for reproving her for her mode of life.

A second capital shows Tristan, one of the Knights of the Round Table, crossing the sea on his sword in the form of a wherry, in search of his wife Iseult, who is seen waiting for him with her dog on the opposite shore.

Again a third capital represents Virgil in a basket suspended from a wall. In the middle ages, the poet was looked upon as an enchanter or magician. He had given rendezvous to a Roman lady, and obtained permission only on condition that he should enter her house at night in the manner represented on the bas-relief. When the poet was half way up, the malicious dame arrested his progress and fastened the cord, leaving Virgil suspended in his basket; hovering, like Mahomet's coffin, between heaven and earth; to become the next morning the ridicule of the whole town of Rome.

In reading the polished verses of the poet, who thinks of him in the light of ridicule, or as paying court to Roman ladies? But human nature, like a well-cut diamond, has many facets, reflecting many lights and shades. Those who have read Lord Lytton's "*Pelham*" will remember a similar incident which befel his Professor, and was probably taken from the same source.

These are singular subjects for a church, but they were intended to fulfil a moral purpose. The representations from the ancient romances depict the follies and extravagances of love: works that were alone read in the age of chivalry: and it was to "point the moral" of these tales that the architect placed them upon the capitals.

The exterior of St. Peter's is more beautiful than the interior, though the latter is very harmonious. It is, however, deficient in possessing no transepts. But the exterior is marked by great richness of ornamentation, and has very much of the beauty of age. Its tone is extremely good. The tower to the right of the main portal is magnificent, and the spire above it, full of grace and beauty, has been favourably compared with Salisbury. It is of pierced stonework, surrounded by eight small turrets, very light and graceful, and is certainly one of the finest spires in France. The tower dates from 1308, and is pure gothic. The middle story is formed of lancet windows, framed within reeded mouldings, above which rise the graceful turrets. The height of the whole is about two hundred and fifty feet.

But the beauty of the church is its east end, with its flying but-

tresses, its gargoyles, its turreted towers, its rounded windows, all ornamented with great richness of decoration. These find their reflection in the water which runs below. At least they did so at our first visit to Caen, but this has lately been altered, and there is no more water to be seen. In our illustration we represent it in its more picturesque aspect. Attached to the church are low, antiquated houses of every form, with gables, and red tiled roofs and dormer windows; a strange and not unpleasing mixture of the sacred and the secular.

But the pride and glory of Caen are its two churches, the Abbaye aux Hommes and the Abbaye aux Dames; the one erected by William the Conqueror, the other by Matilda; the one dedicated to St. Stephen, the other to the Trinity. They are at opposite ends of the town, as if guarding all that lies between them: throwing their influence upon its people, bidding them remember the shortness of life and the beauty of holiness. Let us first visit the Abbaye aux Hommes.

Leaving the church of St. Pierre, and passing down the street which bears its name—the principal street of Caen—you presently turn into a small square. Immediately in front of you stands the present Lycée, or Ecole Normale, a gothic building of the fourteenth century, and formerly the old Norman palace of the bishops. It is attached to the church, with which it forms two angles of the little square.

The west front of the Abbaye aux Hommes is all that can be seen of the church from this position. It is plain and severe almost to rudeness, almost to ugliness; but the west towers and spires that rise above it are stately and beautiful. Once within the church, you stand silent and amazed.

The interior is of vast proportions. Like the exterior it is plain almost to severity, disdaining all ornament; yet is it full of beauty, dignity and refinement; full of majesty and grandeur; full of repose. One feels how it would be spoilt by decoration. The eye scans the whole interior; no one point seems to arrest the attention above another; every portion stands out as perfectly as if we gazed upon its representation in a few feet of canvas.

One of its most striking features is its massiveness. It seems as if it might defy time itself, and would stand as long as the world lasts. It is in the Norman-Romanesque style, and the pillars and rounded arches once more charm by their bold and grand simplicity. The lower row of arches supports a gallery, above which again rise arches on a reduced scale. The gallery continues its way round the choir, and here the arches, of a later date, take the form of the pointed gothic. These are of the thirteenth century. One almost regrets the change of style; it is less simple and dignified; massiveness and grandeur give place to greater lightness, and perhaps to more refinement. Yet on looking down the nave from the west end, the effect of these arches is so beautiful that no place is

left for regret. The building is so vast, the choir looks so far off that almost it has the effect of gazing at a dream picture. Almost it seems as if the roof must open and admit a choir of angels to our wondering vision. The windows of the clerestory consist of alternate tall and short arches meeting the curve of the vault. The transepts end in galleries supported on circular arches.

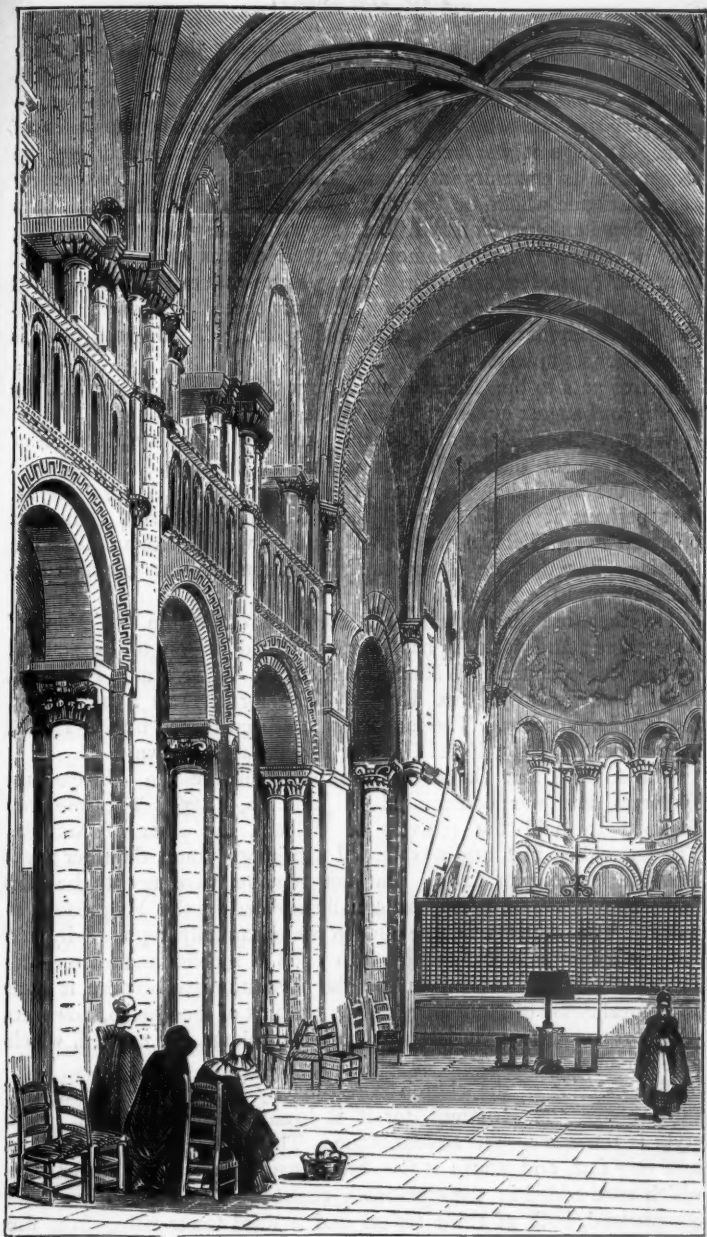
The church was begun by William the Conqueror in 1066, and was consecrated in 1077. The celebrated Lanfranc was its first Bishop. It was intended by William as a resting place for his remains, and here for many years they reposed. His tomb consists of a marble slab in front of the high altar, but the remains are no longer there. The magnificent monument erected by William Rufus was destroyed by the Huguenots in 1562, the tomb was desecrated and the bones were scattered. They were never recovered, with the exception of one thigh bone. This also disappeared in 1793, when the revolutionists again violated the tomb, and the last of the remains disappeared for ever.

The funeral of William the Conqueror—so uncertain is fate—was undertaken at the charity of an unknown knight, faithful to his master in death, as he had no doubt been in life. William had received fatal injuries at the sacking and burning of Mantes, and caused himself to be taken to the Priory of St. Gervais at Rouen, to die. This church is near the railway station, and is supposed to be the oldest church in Rouen, and one of the earliest Christian churches in France. Here, in the Priory, the Conqueror died. His sons and his friends immediately deserted him, his servants plundered him; and this single and solitary knight undertook the burial at his own charge, and escorted the body to Caen. It is sad that the knight's name has not been handed down to posterity. Fidelity is a rare virtue, and those who exercise it under exceptional circumstances are worthy of being immortalised.

The sacristy of the Abbaye aux Hommes was worth inspecting, and contained a portrait of the Conqueror, dating from about the fifteenth century. It represents a large man, without much refinement of feature, which is scarcely to be looked for, but with a determined will and a certain nobility of expression.

Not least interesting about the building was the old sexton, who conducted us both inside and out, and seemed devoted to his task. He discoursed eloquently upon the beauties of architecture, seemed to understand all its points, the periods of transition, the features of the different schools. He was a man of no little refinement, and evidently escorted us for love of the work, not for hope of reward. If he thought we had missed any special feature in our examination, nothing would satisfy him but we must go over the ground again, and pay our tribute of silent admiration to so much that was so simply and surpassingly grand and beautiful.

William the Conqueror was himself a man of no learning or



INTERIOR OF ABBAYE AUX DAMES (showing only a portion of the length).
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education. Much of his success was probably the result of mere animal courage; but as far as we can gather, he had a great deal of that mental power that clear insight and quick decision so necessary in one who is to become a leader and commander of men. Perhaps it was because he was himself unlearned that he recognised its necessity in others. Be that as it may, the monastery of St. Etienne which he founded became celebrated from the days of Bishop Lanfranc, its first Abbot, for its wisdom. In the succeeding ages it sent forth men famous for their talents and virtues. St. Lanfranc opened a school in Caen, which produced scholars versed in science and literature: tastes which they spread not only throughout Normandy, but communicated to England. To this day Caen is famous for its university.

Let us pass to the Abbaye aux Dames, founded by Matilda, the worthy and august queen of William the Conqueror.

When William, Duke of Normandy, married his cousin, Matilda of Flanders, he set the laws of his church at defiance, for they were within the forbidden "degrees of consanguinity." A wise decree, that perhaps it would be well to revive in these days. This act offended Pope Nicholas the Second, and he would have annulled the marriage but that he feared to bring about a war between the Normans and the Flemish.

He therefore bade them each found a church in expiation of their crime; and posterity has ever since had reason to be grateful for the compromise. William founded the Abbaye aux Hommes, Matilda the Abbaye aux Dames. The former was a monastery, the latter a nunnery. The monastery has been turned into a Lycée, the nunnery into the Hôtel Dieu, or hospital of the town.

The Abbaye aux Dames was completed before the Abbaye aux Hommes, and was consecrated on June 10, 1066. The one was destined to hold the remains of William, the other of Matilda. The latter died first, and was buried with more pomp than her royal husband in the year 1083. But her remains were not to be held more sacred. The tomb was equally violated by the Huguenots in 1562. The remains of the Queen were carefully replaced by the Abbess Anne de Montmorency. In 1708 a second mausoleum was raised, which was overthrown by the revolutionists because it bore the Royal Arms of Normandy. The remains of the Queen, however, were respected, and in 1819 a third mausoleum was erected, which still remains.

The exterior of the church is fortunately better seen than that of the Abbaye aux Hommes, for it is beautiful and dignified. The style is the same—the Romanesque. The west doorway is Norman and very fine, and above it rise two square towers, with balustrades which were added in the eighteenth century. The spires have long disappeared, both of these towers and a third tower rising from the transepts.

Entering, the church has the same effect upon you as that of the Abbaye aux Hommes, but it is less severe, less destitute of ornament, and less massive. Therefore it looks lighter and more graceful, yet is full of dignity and repose. It is such a building as one might have expected from the feminine grace and taste of a queen ; the other bears every trace of a more masculine mind.

The whole interior is a marvel ; and, as when you gaze upon the interior of the Abbaye aux Hommes, so here you almost feel as if you looked for the first time upon what was most noble and most perfect in architecture. It is large, but not so large as the other Abbey. The piers are lighter, the pillars project more. An embattled fret relieves the main arches ; small galleries surmount the aisles ; the walls above the arches, instead of a triforium, have a blank continuous arcade of small circular arches which is extremely beautiful.

The choir is walled off from the nave, but is open at the upper part, above which may be seen the pillars supporting the beautiful Norman arches. This portion of the church is reserved to the nuns who nurse the sick that are in the hospital which is attached to the church. Some of these nuns are cloistered, but tend the sick ; they do not go without the gates, and if a visitor passes through the wards, they turn their faces from him.

What were once the cloisters are now devoted to secular uses ; and the large gardens and grounds once trodden by the fair and noble nuns (for most of them belonged to the nobility), are now abandoned to the patients who are sufficiently well to walk through the avenues, and rest in the shadows of the tall trees.

In the far-off days it was the custom for the Abbess of Caen on Trinity Sunday to give a dinner to all the inhabitants of the parish of Vaux-sur-Seulles, including the servants who had lived in their places a year and a day. The dinner was given in the interior of the abbey. All who assembled first washed their hands in an immense tub of water. They then sat down upon the ground and a large oil-cloth was spread before them. Each person received a loaf weighing twenty-two ounces, a piece of boiled bacon half a foot square ; then rashers of fried bacon ; then puddings made of bread and milk ; and as much cider or beer as they could drink.

The repast lasted four hours. But the inhabitants of the parish fell into such disrepute through excess of drinking that Charles VII. put an end to the dinner, and ordered that the money it cost should be paid yearly into the Church to defray the expenses of a Mass to be said on every Trinity Monday for the repose of the dead. At this mass six of the inhabitants who had previously attended the dinner were to be present.

We entered the abbey one evening when the shades of night were falling and vespers were about to be sung by the nuns. They passed silently into the choir, and though we could neither hear nor see

them, we could imagine them bending in their black veils in the attitude of prayer.

The choir was dimly lighted, but the nave was in greater gloom. We sat at the west end, and the whole building rose before us in solemn, silent majesty. The windows of the far east end, beyond the choir, scarcely reflected any light from the sky. Darkness, indeed, was rapidly gathering. The church was full of mysterious shadows, which seemed to change and flit about as if they were



OLD HOUSES, CAEN.

cast by restless ghosts. The beautiful aisles grew faint and dim, the blind arches above were lost in obscurity. All appealed—time, place and occasion—to one's sense of the religious and the divine. We could have sat on for hours wrapped in dreams which almost bordered upon the supernatural; almost made us feel in commune with the ancient mystics. Such an hour was worth a far longer journey, infinitely more time and trouble than this had cost us. We had the nave to ourselves, with the exception of a kneeling figure: a woman's figure in deep mourning, motionless as a statue, bending as a penitent, near the screen enclosing the choir.

Suddenly, as we sat lost in mystic reverie—wrapped in a dream

in which the soul seemed to have left the body and winged its flight to celestial regions—we were awakened by the voices of the nuns raised in the vesper hymn. Clear, beautiful and bright, they rose and fell in softest cadence. Their pure tones rang out and filled every crevice of the building, floated through vault and arch and aisle, now swelling loud, now dying out in gentlest whisper. An invisible, most lovely choir.

It was a moment never to be forgotten. We sat motionless as that drooping figure; lost in rapture; listening, as it seemed, to a choir of angels. The spell never once lifted; we never for a moment came back to earth. Then presently all was over. Quietly as the nuns had entered, they left the choir; flitting back noiselessly to their works of mercy. The lights were put out; the tomb of Matilda was left to its repose; the choir to darkness. We heard a distant door locked; all was ended.

We awoke to life and earth, but we sat on dreaming of what we had seen, allowing its influence to have full sway upon us. There are moments and sensations that only come now and then in a lifetime, and this was one of them. We would have prolonged the time, but the dreams will not stay at our bidding. They are so ethereal, so spiritual, that with the very effort to stay them they forsake us and vanish. It only wanted the quiet figure of that mourner to rise and flit down the aisle with noiseless tread and pass out of the church to arouse us to full consciousness.

We, too, rose and followed on her footsteps out into the night. It was quite dark, and under the stars that shone in the far-off sky we paced the solitary avenues of the gardens and thought upon what we had heard.

And we wondered if in those distant stars there were scenes fairer and more beautiful than these; choirs more angelic; whether they are nearer to the Heaven of Heavens; know more of the mysteries lying beyond the veil; see things less through a glass darkly; are subjected to the same temptations, the same joys and sorrows, the same hopes and fears, the same life tragedies, have the same knowledge of good and evil; and from the hour they were born begin, like ourselves, to draw near to the grave. Finally, whether they are the sheep of those "other folds" we have heard of, eventually to be gathered under one fold and One Shepherd.

These are questions to which there is no reply. In the mysteries of life by which we are surrounded we have but one present refuge and resource: IN YOUR PATIENCE POSSESS YE YOUR SOULS. One day the answer will come to each of us: but only at the moment of that "dread apocalypse."

A NIGHT WITH A RECLUSE IN THE FAYOUM.

IN January, 18—, I was hunting in the Fayoum, that district now, since Egypt has been opened up to Europeans, so well-known to sportsmen. One night while camping out, we were overtaken by a terrific storm, which having blown our tents to the ground, left us without any protection from its violence. There was nothing to do but to walk on, which we did in the direction of the Nile, in the hope of finding some shelter.

Suddenly I caught sight of a small hut; I approached and entered in at a small door, which was standing ajar. I looked round and saw a man seated on a rude bench in one of the corners of the room; his head was buried in his hands, and he seemed to be unaware of my entrance. Upon my making some slight noise, he looked up, and seeing me, rose without any apparent surprise, and made a gesture as if of welcome. In appearance he was the most remarkable man I have ever seen. Although seemingly not old, he was bent as if by intense study or meditation; his hair was iron grey, almost white, and worn away at the temples, showing his magnificent forehead full of power; his features were of the aquiline type and clearly cut, and must at one time have been wonderfully handsome; his eyes, which were deeply set, were of a steely grey hue and unnaturally brilliant, while his skin was absolutely without the slightest particle of colour.

He stood before me, this strange figure, waiting it seemed for me to speak, but when I made some apology for disturbing him, he stopped me with a quiet, old-world courtesy, and said in a deep musical voice:

"My friend, I am a recluse, having and requiring but few comforts, as you see, but such as this hut is, use it and be welcome."

I thanked him and sat down upon a bench in the corner, feeling nevertheless somewhat awkward and uncomfortable. All my efforts to draw him into conversation were futile, although he replied to my questions courteously and kindly. At length I remarked: "Do you never feel lonely here?"

"No," he replied, "for I am not alone."

To my question as to who were his companions, he vouchsafed no answer, and there ensued a long silence, broken only by the patter of the rain-drops upon the roof. Suddenly he said:

"I will tell you the story of my life. No human being has ever before heard it; soon it will be too late, for I have not many hours to live."

"My earlier history," he began, "is unimportant, and not worth repeating. Suffice it to say, however, that when I came of age I

entered into the possession of a comfortable fortune, far more than sufficient for my wants, which were always simple. Worldly ambition I never had; my only desire was to travel. The East inflamed my imagination with its time-defying pyramids and the wrecks of its giant temples, carrying one far back over forty centuries to a time when the blood of human sacrifices flowed upon the altars of Isis and Juno near the banks of the Nile.

"For nearly ten years I lived in the East, travelling first over Syria, Arabia and Egypt, afterwards over India, Siam and Thibet. Then I came back to Egypt, and, wearied with a constant recurrence of adventures and episodes of excitement and danger, sought a period of calm and rest upon a darobeeah on the Nile. I sailed up to Assouan, where I met her who afterwards became my darling wife."

Here he paused a moment as if in deep emotion; then continued:

"I need not describe her; let it be enough to say she possessed all the attributes of an angel—a gentle, loving disposition and a wonderful, almost spiritual, beauty. She was wintering in Egypt on account of her health, for she suffered from an affection of the lungs, and was very delicate. Ah! I believe we loved one another as no two persons have ever loved before; our happiness must have made the angels jealous. We were married, and I took her on the darobeeah down the Nile.

"Six months passed of almost perfect happiness, whose only alloy was the knowledge of her dread disease, which, in spite of the warm, lovely climate, made rapid strides. At Siout we knew she was inevitably doomed, but, although fast growing weaker, she wished to continue our journey.

"Hitherto we had travelled but slowly, stopping often two or three weeks at one place, and exploring together the ruins of the great temples and the wrecks of ancient monuments which strew the banks of the Nile; but now that she was rapidly succumbing, we hurried on with all speed, in order to reach Cairo, if possible, before her death. Fate, however, decreed it otherwise; and this hut is built opposite the spot where she died."

Again he paused, and again after a moment's silence went on:

"I have recalled the scene of her last hours many times, so why not once again for the last time? I feel no sadness, no bitterness now; her death only brought us more closely together, and soon we shall be together for ever. We moored the darobeeah to the bank, for we knew that she could not outlive the night. It was a glorious evening: in the west the sun was just sinking behind the hills; its departing rays flooded the desert with light, giving it the appearance of a vast sea of gold; while in the north loomed up the great pyramids of Sahâra, their outlines clearly limned against the deep sapphire sky. Scattered about the deck of our darobeeah lay our Arab crew and servants, silently smoking and seemingly unmoved

by the shadow of death. Then I could have killed them in my fury at their indifference; now I recognise their wisdom, which teaches them to bow before the will of Allah, and not to seek to turn aside the immutable decrees of Kismet.

"We took her on deck and placed her upon soft cushions; the breeze played with her golden hair and the beams of the dying sun lighted up her pale, attenuated face, which already in my imagination seemed to be radiant with a foretaste of heaven. The moon rose and the stars crept out one by one. It was a saintly night; and in this pathetic blending of twilight, moonlight and dreamlight, we sat together, hand-in-hand, listening to the rustling of the palm trees, the only sound that broke the profound, solemn stillness of the night. I watched her face; she seemed as if taking a last farewell of earth; her ardent nature gave her an innate conception of the plenitude of life, and perhaps it seemed hard for her in the fulness of her youth and beauty to die amidst such a scene of peaceful beauty and halcyon repose.

"At last the end came; I felt a slight pressure of her hand; it grew cold; her loving eyes became dim, and murmuring: 'Kiss me, darling—the last time—do not grieve—I will be your guardian angel,' she died.

"For many months I was almost wild with grief. I travelled in the most dangerous parts of Central Africa, parts hitherto untrodden by Europeans. Death, however, seemed to shun me; I courted but found it not. I passed scatheless through the midst of wild tribes, untouched by storms of arrows; I slept in vast virgin forests beneath trees whose very shadow is reckoned to be death; I spent weeks journeying over immense deserts, the haunts of innumerable lions and beasts of prey; I seemed to bear a charmed life. Three years ago I came here and built this hut, exactly opposite the spot where we moored the darobeeah on that fatal night.

"Two miles away to the east is the Nile, around me are scattered the wrecks of cities and temples, while the sandstone of the surrounding desert is honeycombed with tombs. There is no life here except that of the desert. Sometimes a few wandering Bedouins encamp here, but for weeks and weeks I never see a human being: I am alone amidst the burial of centuries. But now I have regained all my calmness—I might almost say, all my happiness; for during these three years I have mortified my flesh, I have stamped out from my being all human passions, all earthly desires: the world and life are to me nothing. I live only in the spirit and in dreams. I have attained nirvâna. The strength of my body has long since been exhausted by meditations and fastings; but instead I have an immense, an almost unbounded power of intelligence and will, which enables me to cast away my flesh as a garment, and to dwell in the spirit as if beyond the grave.

"And my wife has kept her promise. At first when I came to this place I seemed to experience a sensation of familiarity in the

surroundings, as though something akin to my soul were near and about me—something strange, ineffable, indescribable. At nights I had beautiful vivid dreams, representing to me incidents of my life and places I had visited. Thus, in dreams, seeing faces and things long since forgotten, I re-lived my life, perfected and idealised, and without the bitterness of earth.

"At length I saw my wife; and since then, during one year, we have lived together in the spirit in a mystic, beautiful union. It was night: there was a brilliant moon, and through the open casement the silver beams fell upon the foot of my couch; no sound broke the universal stillness. All was utter silence and perfect peace. I lay upon my couch in a dreamy reverie, when suddenly a delicious feeling of heavenly repose, an ineffable sensation of happiness, stole over me. By my side I saw my wife. No words could describe the glory of her spiritual loveliness, the divine serenity of her loving smile, the beauty of her clinging garments, woven as it were from zephyrs or from pulses of the air: such was their transparency, such was their gossamer lightness.

"She bent down and breathed lightly on my forehead. Instantly it seemed as though some powerful magnetic force had entered my being and was coursing through my veins, purifying my blood from all taint of earth and of flesh, while my soul seemed to quicken and expand until, with a mighty throb, it burst from my body. And then side by side and with hands joined we mounted upwards into the starry heights. Above us were the dense violet skies strewn with stars, beneath rolled the patriarchal Nile, winding among the ruins of temples and pyramids and the wrecks of half-buried cities.

"Since then she has often come for me, and together we float through the infinity of space. Oh the delight, the glory of all this, defies expression. Distance is annihilated: in the twinkling of an eye we can traverse the world from pole to pole, comprehending with our boundless power of intelligence the vast deserts, the pathless forests, the mighty oceans and the virgin mountains covered with untrodden snow over which we pass. We do not speak, but our thoughts are communicated from one to the other by a sort of mental telegraphy: thus we have, so to say, one mind in which all things are in common. From the earth there rises continuously a soft, low sound like a prolonged sigh, mournful and utterly sad, while the heavens resound with a glorious chant, which is borne to our ears, subdued but full of triumph.

"The air is peopled with spirits: as we cleave through space we meet other spirits joined together in this beautiful union of soul, ineffably happy. It is not given to many to penetrate the secrets beyond the grave; only those who, like myself, have so crucified the flesh that all the base instincts which fetter the soul to earth are utterly eradicated can hope to enjoy these spiritual delights. But still, although the living know it not, the dead are continually with

them, soothing often their cares and troubles, saving them often from danger by the warnings of what is called instinct. Thus the dead watch over the living whom they love, compelled by some natural law to guard their lives, but awaiting them with hope.

"Such is the story of my life, not altogether, I think, without its moral. My hours are now numbered—to-morrow my soul will have risen from dust for ever to the fulness of perfect knowledge. My wife will come for me to-night. I feel it and rejoice. Farewell."

My host lay down upon his rough couch, and soon his regular but almost imperceptible breathing told me that he slept. As for me, his deep, solemn voice seemed to sound in my ear and thrill me with a feeling of awe, and I lay awake on my rug for a long time pondering over the strange story of this wild visionary.

It must have been near midnight before I fell into an unquiet slumber, troubled with a succession of fantastic dreams, and it came as a great relief when the rising sun awakened me with a flood of light. I rose at once and looked at my host. He lay on the bed cold and rigid—dead—his arms were stretched out, as if with a gesture of greeting, and upon his calm face was a smile of almost angelic happiness. He must have died about midnight.

Needless to say that I took upon myself to perform the last sacred duty.

C. E. S.



THE ACORN AND THE MUSHROOM.

From the French of Lachambeaudie.

AN acorn bruised a mushroom's head,
Who, thus rebuking, mildly said:
"I pray you, friend, come not so near;
There's ample room for us two here."
With scorn, the acorn made reply:
"Do you suppose that such as I,
Of ancient, noblest lineage born,
Should heed a thing sprung up since morn?"
The mushroom answered in this wise:
"A parvenu you may despise,
Yet bear in mind that 'tis my fate
To deck the tables of the great;
Whilst vilest is the lot for you—
Into the pigstye straight you go."

More than one high-born fool we find,
And oft base-born of noble mind.

M. BETHAM-EDWARDS.

A LILY, AZURE.

I WAS sent by my doctors, after a winter in the south of France, to spend the spring months at Felice on the Lago Maggiore. I was tired of exile, and wanted to be home for the Easter boat race, and it was some days before the beauty of the broad lake and of the sunset over snowy St. Gothard and the blossoming trees forced a kind of contentment upon me.

Sometimes, however, clouds and mists hung over the grey lake, and rain fell with a good will, and then unhappy was the invalid spelling out German newspapers in a damp salon; more unhappy still the youthful bride and bridegroom, already finding their own ideas and conversation begin to flag, yet avoiding and avoided by all fellow-prisoners by mutual consent.

But, happily, rain never lasted very long, and in the sunshine it was pleasant to explore the old town and its neighbourhood.

One Sunday, straying into the village church, I found the children being catechised by the old parish priest, an upright, white-haired man of striking appearance. I lingered to speak to him after the children had gone, and asked him if he would help me to find a teacher, or at least a native whose accent was tolerably pure, and who would talk Italian with me for a little time every day, to accustom my ear to the sound, for mine was little more than book knowledge of the language. The old man listened patiently to my imperfect sentences, talked to me a little, and finding I had no difficulty in understanding his clear, measured accents, he volunteered presently himself to give me a lesson every day. He had little to do; it would be an amusement to him and a pleasure. I wished to offer some equivalent in money, but he put the idea aside, very decidedly, and we arranged that I should come and have my first lesson next morning.

So deserted was the part of the village where the old priest lived that it was with some difficulty I found his house—a small, shabby dwelling near the church. A low passage led to a little inner yard, inhabited by poultry. Round this and under the eaves ran a slight wooden balcony, made picturesque by a vine which grew over it, trailing and untrained. From the balcony opened a sitting-room, very slightly and poorly furnished.

In this house my old friend lived, year out, year in, together with his two old grey-haired brothers, one a priest, one a composer; an ancient sister who kept house for them, and four cats. He had lived here, at Felice, all his life; had never had the opportunity of travelling even so far as Rome, to visit which was the desire of his heart. He had seen, but not rejoiced in, the accomplishment of the unity of

Italy; since then the people had grown independent and did not show the old respect to their priests.

He was very poor—had just enough for his wants, but not enough to satisfy those of the beggars who came constantly to his door. The members of the little household lived very simply—no superfluity of food or of raiment—except, perhaps, in the matter of pocket handkerchiefs, a great display of which might be seen drying on the balcony at the time of the weekly wash. Snuff was the one luxury they allowed themselves.

Most of his life had been monotonous and uneventful. Once he had heard there was a strange lady of distinction in the church, and going there he saw a figure draped in black kneeling before the altar in deep devotion. She spoke to him, when she rose, kind and gracious words, but he could not answer, so overcome he was with reverence and sorrow, for it was the ex-Empress Eugenie after her great loss.

That had been one of the chief events of his life.

Another was, the death of an English nobleman, to whose sick bed he had been called to administer the last sacraments, and who had offered him before he left the room a pile of gold, but he had been obliged to refuse it. Only the Church might receive it; not he, for his personal use; but I think those proffered gold pieces became the groundwork of many dream visions of better living and travel, and larger means of helping the poor, with Rome as the goal of all.

The other grey-haired priest, his brother, looked starved and thin. I saw him but seldom, but the poor old composer often came in and played for me, trying to beat out melodies on the antiquated piano. Many of its notes were fixed and dumb; some of his fingers were useless and stiffened with rheumatism. It fretted him that he could not better express the music he felt within him.

The Padre was very proud of his little church, and showed me its most precious contents. A stone taken from some old Roman temple, with carved figures of dancing nymphs and of a heathen altar—a little blackened picture of the Madonna, visited by sick and diseased pilgrims from afar, because it was said that sometimes its lips had been seen to move as if invoking blessing on a suppliant, and that always in such cases healing had followed; and another Madonna, with sweet eyes and auburn hair and a gracious face, signed with the name of Bernardinis Luini, and visited by tourists, and curtained away from the sight of the everyday congregation in order that an occasional lire might be gained by its unveiling.

Almost close under this picture I noticed that a slab of white marble had been let into the dark stone floor. The words "*A rivederci*"—till we meet again—were carved on it, with the letter "*L*" surrounded by a small wreath of flowers in low relief.

"That is the grave of a stranger," the old priest said, seeing me stop to look at it. "He was found kneeling dead before this picture one Easter morning; no one knew whence he had come. He was

doubtless a foreigner—English or Tedesco—for his hair was fair. His face was most beautiful.”

“And how did he come to be buried here?” I asked.

“Ah,” the Padre answered, with some reserve I fancied. “Two days after his death an order came from the bishop of the diocese that he was to be buried here in this spot, and afterwards the slab was placed over him. But come, the children are waiting for the catechising.”

“But did no friends come to tell his name or visit the grave?” I said, still lingering by the white slab.

“Every Easter Day since he died, eighteen years ago, a blue wreath is laid there; that is all we know,” was the answer.

And then the old priest began to talk to some of the little children coming into the church, and question them, his own remarks and explanations becoming longer and more earnest, until at last, instead of walking up and down the aisle, he remained standing near the altar, and with growing eloquence expounded the clause in the creed which formed that day’s lesson: “I believe in the Communion of Saints,” and spoke of the mutual help and sympathy between the three Churches—the church “*militante*,” the church “*purgante*,” and the church “*trionfante*” in heaven. I think the good old man had some hope of weaning me from heretical ideas, and leading me into the true fold by his eloquent earnestness.

The days were monotonous but passed quickly enough at Felice. I was gaining health and strength; was able to take long morning walks as well as boating expeditions in the afternoon—a lazy kind of boating when I lay in the stern and was pulled along by a bright, handsome boy, Luigi, of about seventeen, who would chatter away by the hour, to the great benefit of my Italian—about the poverty of the country and the quarrels amongst the ill-paid soldiers, and the glories of the annual festa held under the arcade, and the pride of all the village in its Campanile, the most beautiful on all the lake.

“The Intra people, who are so rich, subscribed, and were determined to have a more beautiful one than ours, and they built it four feet higher; and soon afterwards one of the great summer storms came and blew down all the new part; and since then they had not been so proud, and had said nothing about rebuilding it. And no other village had a picture like ours that had worked miracles, or a beautiful Madonna with eyes like those of the rich English lady who came every year to the grand villa she had built at Stresa. She came there always in the spring—sometimes her husband and his friends with her; and then they filled the house with company and had a festa every day.”

I had heard of the “English lord,” Sir Robert Ley, and his beautiful villa. Indeed, I had been given a letter of introduction to him by Blake, my college friend, who sometimes came to stay with him, but not feeling strong enough for society, I had not delivered it.

Easter Sunday came round, my last Sunday at Felice, for "after Easter" the doctors had said I might begin moving homewards, and I intended to take them at their word.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and the bells of distant villages could be heard from over the water as I strolled through the village to take my last look at the old church. It was filled with the people of the village and the country round, in their holiday dress. Some stayed and joined in the service going on; others—the men chiefly—came in for a few moments only, knelt down, crossed themselves, said a silent prayer, and went away noiselessly. Little children clinging to their mother's hand looked round with wondering eyes at the red cloth on the pillars, the gay flowers on the altar, and the unveiled Madonna.

The old priest stood at the altar. In his sacerdotal robe, and with the incense smoke about him, he seemed no longer the gentle, kind old man, the servant of all, but rather the mediator, the advocate of the wandering multitude, bearing the knowledge of their sins in his prayer, and the knowledge of pardon in his benediction.

I stayed till the service was at an end, and then stood aside while the crowd passed out. Two or three young girls remained behind in the corner near the Luini Madonna, and I saw they were pointing at some object lying on the white marble slab.

"Casa c'è?" I asked one who was leaving the church, and stopped to dip her finger reverently in the stone basin of holy water.

"The blue wreath," she whispered, as she sprinkled the sacred drops on her breast and forehead, and passed out.

I drew near the stranger's grave, and saw that the blue wreath of which I had heard from the Padre was indeed there—forget-me-not and starry gentian from the high Alps the flowers of which it was composed.

"Who placed it there?" I asked.

"Ah, no one can tell that," a little girl answered. "Always on Easter day it is found there; always a beautiful blue wreath; but no one is ever seen bringing it, and often the flowers are such as do not grow in our country. Graziella, the baker's widow, declared one Easter Eve she would watch and see who brought it, but at daybreak she came home stiff with cold and terrified, because she said while she was waiting white wings had suddenly brushed past her; and she was in bed for a month with rheumatism; and the Padre said it was a right punishment for her vain curiosity, and that we would do better to tend the graves of our own dead than to spy on others who remembered their duty more faithfully than ourselves—for Graziella had never said a mass for her husband, or put a wreath on his grave. So now no one likes to ask any questions about it, but I think myself that whoever lies in this spot was a saint; and that the wreath is laid here by an angel who saw him die."

I stayed a little time there, musing. For eighteen years, the

priest had said, the grave had never been neglected ; that seemed a long devotion in this hurried, forgetful world.

Next day I said good-bye to the little household where I had always been welcomed. I found the poor old faces brighter and more animated than usual. A great event had happened—a famous musician had come from Milan to play the organ at Baveno on a feast day ; and the mass he had chosen was one written long before by my poor old withered friend, who had sometimes tried to play a few bars of it to me, and the famous musician had sent across the lake to Felice to tell him this, and to ask for his presence at the church. He had never heard his mass performed before, and his eyes brightened and his poor old hands trembled as he spoke of it.

I left, I think, on that very day, and never heard how the old man bore the fulfilment of his longing desire, or whether the music of that Easter time was the last he heard on earth.

II.

Two years later I was again at Felice.

Business had called me to North Italy, and before returning home I resolved to spend a little time amongst the beautiful lakes. I passed some days exploring the unexpected windings of Como ; one or two at little bright Lugano ; and at Stresa, on Maggiore, I lingered for a few more, chiefly kept there by the neighbourhood of my friend Blake, who was staying at the great show villa belonging to the "English lord" I used to hear of at Felice—Sir Robert Ley.

The villa was full of guests. Blake told me of them and their doings, and I saw them sometimes driving in canopied phaetons along the shores of the lake, or skimming over its surface in gaily-decked pleasure-boats. It was very inconvenient to Sir Robert having to come abroad just then, Blake told me ; but his wife had been ailing and needed change ; and she could never be persuaded to leave her home in the fens except for these spring months, which she liked to spend on Maggiore.

I gathered that she took little part in the festivities of the villa. She spent most of her time in her garden, or on the lake with an old boatman devoted to her service ; or sometimes she would visit the little chapel at Stresa, and though not a Catholic would stay there for hours. She could seldom be persuaded to join in any excursions ; had withstood all solicitation to spend a day at Felice a little time ago, though it was her birthday and they had all begged her to come. Her guests seemed to look on her with respect and some little awe.

I spent an evening at the villa, but she was not well and did not appear ; but a day or two after I met her as I was walking along the brink of the lake. She was looking across the water to the setting sun ; her hands clasped, and, as it seemed to me, her eyes full of

tears. She had the remains of great beauty, a graceful figure and large dark eyes, though her hair was quite white, contrasting with them. She bowed slightly on seeing me, and walked slowly back towards the villa gardens, entering by a low side door, half hidden with Banksia roses.

A day or two later I went back to my old quarters at Felice. My first visit was to the house of my good friend the priest, but, to my sorrow, it was deserted. The old man had died some months earlier; both his brothers in the previous year. The poor old sister had alone survived, and had with her little possessions gone to live with some relative in another village; for the tumble-down old house was no longer safe to live in.

The new Padre had established himself in a more substantial one, having some private means of support. I made his acquaintance soon: a hard-looking, taciturn man, a great contrast to his genial predecessor.

The complete disappearance of the little household I had felt so much interested in lessened the attraction Felice had had for me, and I resolved to go on to Turin early in the next week, when the Easter fêtes would be over.

I found some of my old acquaintances, however, living and working as they used to do; amongst them Luigi, my favourite boatman, talkative as of old. The times did not seem to have mended, by his account. The taxes were still heavy. There was very little money in the country. The soldiers were as ill-fed and discontented as ever. The new Padre was not popular, I found; though better off than his predecessor, he was not as ready to share his superfluity with those in need; he was harsh also in his manner, and had changed some of the old customs: only opened the church at certain hours, instead of leaving it unlocked day and night, as of old, and had the morning service at an hour when all the working-men were already in the field and could not attend. No rich stranger came and built a beautiful villa at Felice as the English lord had done at Stresa. Ah! he was so rich! spent more in the couple of months he stayed there than all the tourists who came to the great hotel at Felice. And the signora: she gave away hundreds of lire every year; even sending a present to Felice every Easter for the poor and the sick; always good and kind to the poorest beggar and wanderer, though she looked so proud and grand.

So chattered Luigi on Easter Eve, as he rowed me slowly over the great lake, till we could see the golden gate of the St. Gothard Pass, veiled in the changing sunset hues. Luigi, however, thought less of the purple and gold than of the background of dark clouds to which he pointed.

"That means a storm," he said. "We shall have bad weather before morning."

The air was hot and oppressive, and after dinner at the table d'hôte,

not feeling attracted by any of the guests, I strolled down the garden to the border of the lake, and presently going through the village I went up the broad steps of the old church, which I had not yet visited.

It was silent and deserted. Black cloth, left there since the Good Friday service, hung heavily from the pillars and covered the altar. My thoughts went back to the catechising I had so often heard there, to the eager children's faces, the good old priest's serene kindness; the heartfelt eloquence of his discourses; his pride in his church and its contents; the story of the stranger who had died there under the picture of the Madonna, and of the white slab which had been placed over his grave.

I had unconsciously taken a seat close to it, and suddenly noticing it bare and cold in the moonlight, I remembered the wreath which used to be laid on it by unseen hands, and wondered if on the morrow it would as usual be found there, or if the silent tenant of the tomb was at last forgotten. The heat of the evening and my idle thoughts and the stillness of the place so affected me that at last sleep stole upon me unawares.

It must have been after midnight, and it was quite dark, when with a sudden start I awoke.

All was changed from the stillness of the evening. The wind howled round the church and rattled the window frames. Hailstones beat against the leaded panes, and now and then I could hear the distant growl of thunder. I groped my way to the door, thinking that I might gain the more genial shelter of some house in the village, but I could not open it; it was locked outside.

I remembered the little door in the corner near the white slab, and painfully felt my way to it, but its fastenings also resisted my efforts. The recollection of what Luigi had said about the new Padre and his regulations flashed upon me, and I guessed that the doors must have been locked for the night while I was asleep.

It was a dreary prospect: that of a long night in the old church. I lay down again on the bench where I had fallen asleep, but sleep was not to be won a second time. The storm grew more furious, the thunder louder and more frequent, flashes of lightning lit up the black-palled pillars and the weird monuments. I shut my eyes and drew my hat over them.

Suddenly it seemed to me as if above the noise of wind and hail there rose the cry of a human voice outside the door near which I sat, and I could hear that someone tried in vain to undo its fastenings. I went nearer the door and listened, thinking it might be some friend come to help me, but it was a despairing voice I heard.

"Lawrence! Lawrence!" it cried, "let me in; why should I be shut out? For twenty years have I not come and brought you the only gift you can take from me now? What sin have I been guilty of that I must be punished like this? Have I not repented long

enough of my pride that sent you away? And it is only once in the year I can come and ask you to forgive me, and why must the door be shut against me at last?"

A gust of wind seemed to whirl away the words and turn them into a shriek of despair. Presently the voice was raised again, pleading and suppliant.

"Ah, Lawrence, it will break my heart if I am kept outside. Is it not my only happiness to come and kneel beside you for a little time? Ah, let me in."

I could hear the door rattled and shaken, but I knew it was in vain, no ordinary force could open it. A sob of despair mingled with the rising wind.

Then suddenly a great peal of thunder was heard. Flash after flash of lightning illumined the church. The wind rose and shrieked, and in a moment—whether from the fury of the storm, or by some electric force or the strength of some human effort—the window-frame above me was dashed in and crashed upon the floor, and hail and rain were beating on my head.

Bewildered, I sought shelter near the altar. Crash after crash of thunder warned me that the storm had not yet spent itself. Then I could hear the rain coming down in torrents. The wind grew quieter by degrees, and at last all was still; and the first ray of sunrise shone in through the east window—shone upon the white marble slab, where, amongst the fragments of shattered lead and glass and half-melted hailstones, lay a wreath of lilies—not white, but blue—blue as a glimpse of the sky between a rift in the clouds above.

I recognised in a moment the wonderful blue lilies of Zanzibar (*Nymphaea Zanzibarensis*); but was almost too cold and weary and bewildered and benumbed to wonder how they had come there through the storm and the barred doors. I saw that the broken window opened a way of escape to me, and quickly availed myself of it, clambering up to it with the help of one of the benches. I found my way back to the hotel through the deserted street, and in my comfortable bed almost forgot the fears and trouble of the night, and awoke at mid-day rather doubtful as to what had been a dream and what reality.

Strolling out in the afternoon, I was surprised to see Blake in the hotel garden.

"What has brought you here?" I asked. "Are you tired of your villa and its luxuries?"

He looked grave as he answered:

"Oh, there has been a melancholy wind-up to our party there! Lady Ley has been taken dangerously ill, and we have all had to leave. It was very sudden; for last night she seemed all right when she said good-night to us after dinner as usual; but this morning we were told by Sir Robert that she was very ill indeed. He said no more: gave no particulars; but there is an idea that the

poor thing must have been sleep-walking. They say she was found senseless on the shore near the lake ; her hands all cut and bleeding. The old boatman, who was the first to find her, was trying to carry her up to the house, when one of the maids who was going to early mass saw her and gave the alarm."

Blake seemed troubled and anxious, and was expecting a messenger from Stresa with the latest news. At nightfall it came : Lady Ley had never recovered consciousness, and had died at sunset.

Two days later Blake asked me to go with him to Stresa. There was to be a funeral service at the little chapel in the grounds of the Villa Ley, before the poor lady's body was taken back to England, and he wished to attend.

We found a large gathering there, some of the late guests at the villa, some English acquaintances of the neighbourhood, and many of the poor villagers from round about who had benefited by the open-handed generosity of the dead woman, whose loss would be felt the more that her husband had already resolved to shut up the villa, sell it or let it, but never come to it again.

There were many tears shed during the short, impressive service. When it was over and the people had dispersed, Blake and I still lingered, waiting for the evening boat to take us back to Felice.

An old man, the gardener, who had been waiting near, came to the chapel door, a small basket covered with leaves in his hand. He recognised Blake, and stopped to speak to him.

"Ah, the signora, the poor lady !" he said, passing his hand across his eyes. "When shall we see her like ? May God bless her always ; may God give her peace. She was most good ; most noble ; most gracious ; the most gentle lady in all the world ; ah, how the flowers will droop now she is gone ! she loved them so much, she used to come out every morning to tend them, and would speak to me about them as if they were her friends. She always loved the blue ones best ; she told me once it was for the sake of a friend who had loved them too, and who had died. Her blue lilies, poor soul, I thought she was laughing at me when she spoke of them, but she had skilled men from Milan to make a house and a pond for them, and they were planted in the water, and she taught me to tend them, and at last this year they bloomed—a wonderful sight at sunrise ! the little pond was covered with them. But on the day of her death they were stolen ; some evil-disposed one must have made his way in and taken them, for it was not until mid-day I thought of going to look at them ; I was watching at the door all the morning for news of my lady, and when I went back to the pond they were all gone—only one little bud left. And now it has opened, and I brought it to send with her to her cold grave in England."

He opened the little basket and took the flower out reverently. It was a blue Zanzibar lily.

BECALMED.

I.

THE merchant with an anxious face
 Went slowly through the market place ;
 They called, above the hucksters' din,
 " Good master, be your ships come in ? "
 But still, " We look for them," he said,
 And every neighbour wagged his head.
 Quoth the grey monk against the wall,
 " What gain in wealth, if this be all ? "

II.

The men-at-arms, so proud and fair,
 Were mustered in the city square ;
 Ah, youth is fair and manhood proud—
 " And yet," so spake the tattling crowd,
 " These make not half so brave a show
 As those that fell a year ago ! "
 Quoth the grey monk against the wall,
 " Where's glory's gain, if this be all ? "

III.

The lovers went by twos and twos,
 In garden paths between the yews ;
 Where boughs scarce let the sunbeams slip—
 Close arm to arm, quick lip to lip.
 " When courting's over, summer's fled,
 The girls may weep ! " the gossips said.
 Quoth the grey monk against the wall,
 " What gain in love, if this be all ? "

IV.

A savoury scent of roasting hare
 Came steaming out upon the air ;
 " What gain in love, or wealth, or pride ?
 Better be calm, and stand aside ;
 Give the wild world its restless way,
 And in seclusion watch and pray ! "
 Quoth the grey monk against the wall,
 " Truly religion's worth them all ! "

G. B. STUART.

